

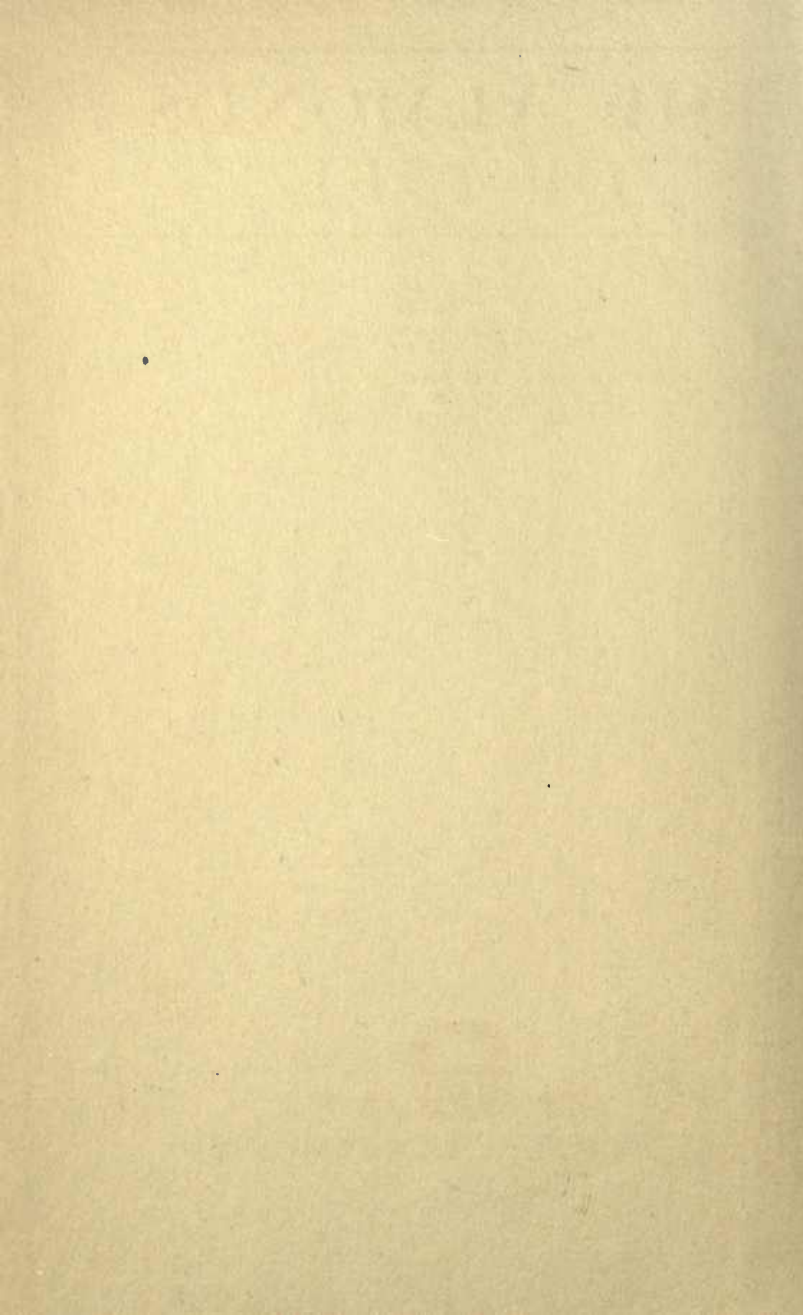
THE ALMONDS
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F. E. MILLS YOUNG



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THE ALMONDS OF LIFE

BY

F. E. MILLS YOUNG

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PAST," "BEATRICE ASHLEIGH,"
"THE BYWONNER," "ETC."



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BOOK I: DISSATISFACTION

Almonds come to those who have no teeth.

CHINESE PROVERB.

THE ALMONDS OF LIFE

BOOK I: DISSATISFACTION

CHAPTER I.

GEORGE ALLERTON leaned with his shoulder against the frame of the French window and watched his wife coming towards him along the sunlit path between the acacias. His eyes, beneath their faintly frowning brows, were critical and attentive; they noted two things—that she was unbecomingly attired, and that her figure had lost its youthful grace. He tried to remember her age; it was within a year or so of his own, and he was thirty-four. When he had married her she had a very pretty figure. She had not been strikingly good-looking; but her hair was soft and pretty, and her eyes, clear and happy and trusting, cheated a man into believing that she was even beautiful. He had thought her a perfect chum. That was what she was. He never had been passionately in love with her; but he had wanted her insistently for those qualities of companionship and sympathy which he had readily perceived and appreciated in her. They had been always excellent friends. He could not recall any serious difference of opinion throughout the ten pleasant years of their married life.

The success of those ten years of matrimony were in a measure due to the fact that both were adaptable, and

neither exacted unduly from the other. Theirs was a partnership in every sense; they shared naturally. Only in one thing did the woman outstrip the man in understanding, and that was in the matter of parenthood. She was a devoted mother, while the parental relationship fitted the man indifferently. He was carelessly fond of his two little daughters, aged respectively nine and eight years, but he would have been quite content without them. Children bored him; he never cared to have them around. But he was proud of them, proud of their straight young bodies and their childish beauty; had they been ill-formed or plain he would have ignored their existence. He recognised that the time might come when he would be glad to acknowledge his obligation in regard to them, glad possibly to have their companionship in the days when declining strength made it less easy for him to make and keep friends. To a man in the early thirties age, which a man in the twenties takes no account of, is viewed only darkly, but it is viewed from the distance in the light of possibility none the less. Allerton hated to think of age in connection with himself. He could not place himself in any but an active environment. Always he saw himself alert and keen and forward in any movement; and he saw his wife shoulder to shoulder with him, encouraging, helpful, sympathetic—saw her as he was accustomed to see her, tall and strong and athletic of build. Change—physical change—until to-day had not occurred to him as possible. Now, as he watched her coming up the path with a sign of weariness in her step, and her face showing unaccustomed lines under the shadow of the unbecoming hat, he recognised that she had changed very considerably since the day when

he had married her and spent an invigorating open-air honeymoon among the Swiss mountains, which they had climbed together. She was a girl no longer; the flush and the gracious roundness of youth were gone for ever. Oddly this fact annoyed him. He resented it; and he vented his resentment on her as soon as she came within speaking range.

"Take off that damned thing you've got on your head and burn it," he said. "I've never seen you look worse in anything."

Mrs. Allerton laughed good-naturedly.

"I know I look a fright," she said. "But it was an expensive hat. I must wear it."

"Rot!" he ejaculated irritably. "Put it in the kitchen fire. . . . Take it off now, anyhow. I can't talk to you like that, and I've got some news—by the mail. Most extraordinary news. I never was so surprised in my life. Old Fred is married."

"Fred!" she repeated, and paused in the act of unpinning the hat to regard him with astonished eyes under the oscillating brim, which was all the more unbecomingly tilted as it was over one eyebrow.

He seized the hat and pulled it off. The sight of her in it seemed to enrage him.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed, and attempted to rearrange her hair. "I wish you wouldn't be so rough. One would suppose that Fred's marriage had annoyed you. Why shouldn't he marry? Stodgy old dear! Besides, he isn't so very old. He can't be fifty yet."

"Fred Wootten is forty-eight," he informed her. "It isn't his age so much, but somehow one never thought of him marrying. I wonder what sort of woman he has got hold of. I can't imagine the type which would

be likely to attract him. It is sure to be some one of a sensible age; old Fred wouldn't go in for anything skittish."

"One can't tell," Mrs. Allerton said sensibly. "He is rich. That is a big temptation to some women. A clever woman could easily take him in. I hope she is nice: he is such a dear. What does he say?"

She held out her hand for the letter, and her husband gave it to her to read, as he had done with most of his private correspondence since their marriage.

"He enthuses a lot. According to his description, she is the most wonderful woman in the world. He never refers to her as a girl; that's why I consider she must be of a sensible age. They are coming out at the end of the month."

"He says she is beautiful," Mrs. Allerton murmured, without looking up from the page she was reading.

Allerton grinned.

"It doesn't stand that other people will agree with him," he returned. "Fred is seeing things through rose-coloured glasses. You will find as you read on that her loveliness is only to be equalled by her wit and personal charm. Wootten puts things in such early Victorian style. If he's got all that, he's got too much for his money. Sound value is more satisfactory than an amazing bargain. There is usually some flaw in a bargain which, overlooked before acquirement, asserts itself later. I shall be in England when the bride arrives. You'll have to keep me posted as to events."

She laughed.

"I'll see about getting the house done up for them," she said. "I notice he asks you to, but that's more in my line than yours. There isn't much time. He must

have fixed it all up very quickly. It isn't three months since he went home, and they have been married nearly a month. He has kept things dark, sly old thing!"

"Better not do too much to the house," her husband advised. "As likely as not when the bride sees it she'll want to move. It's just a box. Wootten ought to have fixed up something better than bachelor quarters before bringing out a wife."

"As though a girl newly married bothers her head about such things," she said. "Any old place serves. Later, when the novelty wears off, she can amuse herself by expanding—as we did."

"Our case was different," he returned. "There wasn't any disparity to make our lives a misfit."

"No," she said, and tucked a hand affectionately within his arm. "But we don't know that there is any great difference between their ages. And I think sometimes it is rather an advantage when the wife is considerably younger than the husband."

"Advantageous for whom?" he asked.

"For the wife." She laughed, and carelessly swung the hat she carried by its brim. "If I were ten years younger than you, you wouldn't find fault with my appearance."

Allerton looked amused.

"That's less to do with your age than with the number of years we've been married," he said. "It is proof of a tried affection. It is a sign of indifference when a man grows careless in regard to his wife's looks—as it is a sign of indifference on her side when she ceases to trouble to appear at her best for him."

"Well!" She disengaged her hand from his arm and held up the hat she carried for a closer inspection, a

faint pucker drawing together her heavily-marked brows. "That settles the fate of the hat, I suppose. It's lucky you can afford to be so fastidious. I possess an economic mind which resents waste. I can't accustom myself to extravagance as you can; my early training was all against it. Sometimes I wish you were poor, so that we had to contrive a little. I'd just love to make do with any old thing just to prove to you how indispensable I could be in adversity."

"A woman possessed of that quality can make herself indispensable in any condition," he contended. "Where the need to create the situation exists the quality may safely be considered lacking."

"I am going in," she answered, a good-humoured smile playing about her lips, "to make myself wonderful to behold. When I reappear I trust you will be in a more gallant mood. Some women would insist upon a deed of separation for less than you've said."

He turned his head to look after her when she passed him and went into the house through the open window. For the ten years during which they had lived together she had treated his bursts of irritation and occasional rudeness with the same good-natured tolerance and unforced gaiety. She seldom lost her temper. To do him justice he did not often provoke her to anger, and he had never before been guilty of so personal an attack. But it was a fact, he told himself, that she was growing negligent; and, since with increasing years her looks did not improve, to encourage a carelessness that was wholly unnecessary was fair to neither. He liked his wife to appear smart.

Involuntarily he glanced at the letter which he still held, and turned the closely written sheet of paper and

read again a paragraph towards the end of the letter in which the bridegroom of nearly fifty referred with enthusiasm to the exceptional qualities of his bride.

"I don't know what I have done," he wrote, "to deserve such happiness. I am impatient for you, who are one of my greatest friends, to meet my wife. Her personal charm, her wit, and her beauty are amazing. I am the luckiest man on God's earth."

Allerton smiled drily. He was wondering how many of the numberless dull married people he knew had felt, if they had not so expressed themselves, the same exalted emotion during the period of the honeymoon.

CHAPTER II

WHEN she had taken off the dress which, as well as the unbecoming hat, had found disfavour in her husband's eyes, Maud Allerton seated herself at her dressing-table and scrutinised her reflection attentively in the glass for several minutes.

She did not detect much amiss with her appearance. For a woman of thirty-two she wore remarkably well. She made a faint grimace at her reflection and shrugged her bare and still pretty shoulders carelessly.

"Age has paid a first visit and left a card between your brows," she mused. "Fancy George discovering that! I didn't know men noticed these things!"

She unpinned her hair and shook it out and ran the comb through its soft masses.

"You'll need to take more trouble over your toilet, poor dear, or accustom yourself to a fault-finding husband. I'm learning. I thought old married people like ourselves jogged along comfortably without bothering about such things."

Having started on this train of thought, it was not easy to detach her mind from the disturbing new idea which held it. She had never been a vain woman. She was not possessed even of the ordinary woman's interest in pretty clothes, or the instinctive feminine disposition to make the most of her appearance. She did not do justice to such good looks as were hers. And it came

to her with something of a shock that a small thing like this could matter. Life is made up of small things—little things which grow into big things. It is disregard of the little things that brings one stumbling up against the aggregate result of stupendous difficulties.

When Maud Allerton appeared later on the stoep, where her husband sat smoking with his feet up on the rests of his chair, he glanced cursorily in her direction and started to talk about impersonal matters. He had forgotten the recent discussion, and passed no comment on her appearance, which disappointed her; she had taken great pains to please him, and he did not even notice that she was wearing a new dress. She looked "all right," as he would have phrased it, therefore there was nothing to comment upon.

"I met Nash at the Club," he observed. "He's down on his luck; had an unholy row with his wife. She sails for England next week."

"She was going home, anyway," Mrs. Allerton returned. "Probably some people will say we've had a row when you sail without me. I'm going myself next year to place the children at school. There may be ground for scandal in that."

"Why not? A lot may happen in a year." He looked up with an easy, satisfied laugh. "You are not the sort of woman about whom scandals are started. Some people contrive to surround themselves with an atmosphere of intrigue."

"Yes," she acquiesced, and played with the creeper about the verandah supports. "I haven't much sympathy with that kind of thing. They make a lot of trouble, those people, and upset other lives besides their own."

"They can be somewhat interesting, though."

She moved nearer to him and stood behind his chair with her hand on the back of it.

"Don't try to make me believe that you are developing a taste for melodrama. You! For ten years I've known you as a reasonable human being with a proper sense of responsibility, and now you pose as inclining towards questionable morality. For ten years I've known Fred Wootten for a confirmed bachelor, and he breaks out also in a fresh place and gets married. My solid world is shaken to its foundations."

"A little shaking up does no one any harm," he asserted. "That is, if the shaking is endured philosophically. Nash thinks he is getting even with Fate by drinking hard; he'd much better chum up with some one else, and let his wife go to—to wherever discontented wives eventually drift. Life together in the circumstances must be hell. I gave him my views."

Mrs. Allerton looked down at him with a faint smile, and touched his cheek lightly with her finger. Despite the fact that he was two years older than herself he seemed to her a boy still.

"Don't attempt to advise other people," she said. "Advice isn't of the slightest value. One needs to be behind the bedroom door to judge between husband and wife. She may have good grounds for her discontent. At least no one has ever cast unworthy suspicion at her."

"My dear girl!" Allerton sat up straighter and turned his head in order to see her face. "There is more than one form of immorality. An uncontrolled temper is the vilest thing in the world."

"Well, of course. It's the lack of control that makes

it so. Uncontrol—that is the basis of all immorality. One has to practise restraint. When two people can't get on together they should separate decently."

"Yes," he said. "That's my own idea—only possibly I didn't emphasise the decency. That's the feminine touch. If, for instance, you left me, I think I should look about for consolation."

"Don't!" she said. "I hate you to jest about these matters."

He laughed, and got up and put his arm about her waist.

"Come along down to the gate," he said. "If I don't move about after a discussion on morals I shan't be able to eat any dinner."

The Allerton's garden was a large one, well wooded, with tall hedges of plumbago enclosing it behind impenetrable walls of green, starred with pale blossoms which showed softly blue between the leaves. The house behind, with its back towards the veld and the valley through which the Baaken's River flowed its sluggish course, was two-storied and comfortable, the home of wealthy people, with every evidence of wealth in the beautifully-kept grounds, and in the interior decoration and furnishing of the house.

People wondered why the Allertons continued to live in Port Elizabeth when it was obviously unnecessary. In most instances when a man has amassed wealth he returns to the old country to spend it where, it is usually imagined, a fortune can be spent to better advantage. Possibly the fact that Mrs. Allerton was South African by birth was responsible for her preference for remaining in the country where the greater part of her family still resided. She was satisfied to

have her children educated in England, but she did not wish to live in the cold grey climate which was her husband's country, and Allerton himself was indifferent on the point. A trip home every two years sufficed for him. Sometimes he went alone, as he had arranged to do shortly, because his wife did not care often to go without the children; when she did make up her mind to leave them they were placed in the care of her brother, who was farming near Craddock, and who was married and had children of his own.

A long stay on the farm was the greatest joy of the Allerton children's lives. On the farm they learnt to ride barebacked, as their mother had done in her childhood, and acquired other useful accomplishments which are not taught in the town. It was a grand life for children. Mrs. Allerton, when she left them to it, had only one regret, and that was on her own account. She worried about them when the blue expanse of the Atlantic separated her from them. Her husband taunted her on this score at times. She did not, he informed her, betray the same restless anxiety when an equal mileage stretched between her and him.

"How can you tell," she once retorted, "what racking distress tears me when you are not there to see?"

"I draw my deductions from the admirable fortitude with which you endure the parting," was the answer he had made on that occasion—an answer which had affected her curiously, and set her thinking seriously about their married relations. Judged all round there was no flaw perceptible. They were regarded by those who knew them as admirably suited to one another. They were admirably suited. It was no sign of a diminution of affection when two people who

loved one another could face a brief separation with cheerful unconcern.

Maud Allerton knew that the love she bore for her husband was stronger and deeper now than the untried love she had given him at the time of their marriage. He had become as a part of herself. She could not conceive of a life apart from him; his thoughts and feelings seemed woven inextricably with her own, until she could not distinguish between them. She had grafted her mind upon his, and had so centered her interest in him that she had ceased to have any separate existence, but lived her life, as it were, for him. It is doubtful whether at any time he made her a full return; but he satisfied her idea of what a husband should be. He was her chum and her man, and the father of her children.

Walking with him now in the brief twilight, with the night beetles winging their blundering flight between the tall hedges, and the croaking of the frogs sounding from the reed-grown pond beyond the path, she felt extraordinarily happy. It was a glorious evening, warm and still, and the scent of orange blossoms and night jessamine hung with a heavy fragrance upon the quiet air. She was glad to think in her own happiness of the happiness of the man who had always struck her as a lonely figure, and who was lonely now no longer. She recalled his glowing description of his wife, and their grey eyes smiled their appreciation in the dusk. It was nice to know that men thought all that of the women they married.

"I wonder why Fred Wootten did not marry in his youth?" she said.

Allerton paused and leaned upon the garden gate

and looked across the broad road to the Park, darkly green and silent, with the last light from the sky lingering on the tree-tops and the spiked leaves of the palms. The Park lay between, and shut them off from the view of other houses.

"There was some one," he said, and reflected a while. "He did tell me, but I forget. I think she jilted him."

"It has taken him a long time to get over that," Mrs. Allerton said.

"Oh, Wootten's an odd sort of chap. He is the most reserved beggar I know—keeps his feelings bottled up. I don't suppose I should have heard that much, but I asked him point blank—just as you asked a moment ago. One has to drag things out of him."

"That accounts," Mrs. Allerton said, "for his secrecy in regard to his marriage. This second venture had to be an accomplished fact before he published it. I think he was wise."

Allerton laughed.

"Your theory doesn't suggest particular confidence in the lady," he returned. "I would attribute his reserve to self-consciousness rather than to caution."

He put out a hand and drew her nearer.

"I wonder what they are up to at this moment? Mooning like you and I, perhaps."

CHAPTER III

THERE was so little time in which to make anything like suitable arrangements for the arrival of the bride at the little house in Park Lane, which Wootten had rightly named the Cottage, that Mrs. Allerton jostled her indolent husband into a show of activity, and personally conducted him the following morning on a tour of inspection of the house and all it contained.

The rooms were on one floor: there were six in all, including the kitchen. Two of these were occupied by an elderly European housekeeper who for years had controlled Mr. Wootten's household and ministered to his comfort and relieved him entirely of every domestic care. She had received information of the marriage by the same mail as George Allerton. It had come as something of a shock to her. She wore a dazed expression when the Allerton's arrived, and appealed to Mr. Allerton for confirmation of the news with the manner of one who, although the letter was written in her employer's neat, familiar handwriting, disbelieved in its contents, and fancied herself the victim of a jest. The Allerton's left no room for doubt in her mind.

"It's very unexpected," she said. "I never supposed Mr. Wootten would change his mode of life after all these years."

"Nobody ever supposes these things," Allerton re-

turned. "Revolutions—this is a domestic revolution—happen usually when one is least prepared. Mrs. Allerton would like to look through the house, if it is convenient. We have been asked to smarten it up."

They were standing on the stoep which shaded the front of the house. It was creeper-covered, and the purple flowers of the bougainvillea made a brilliant splash of colour against the dark background of leaves. The bougainvillea grew so thickly that it entirely screened the stoep and front windows from the road, separated from it only by the tiny garden which surrounded the house.

Everything was on so contracted a scale that even Mrs. Allerton felt damped when considering the requirements of the limited household. It would not be possible for the housekeeper to monopolise two rooms; she would have to content herself with a bed-sitting room. There was no longer any need for a housekeeper, she reflected; and felt a certain sympathy with Mr. Wootten's faithful chatelaine. These abrupt changes were disconcerting and apt to upset many lives.

"It's rather hopeless," she said, when she had made her examination of the different rooms. "Everything is good, but it is all so heavy and—unfeminine. It's just a bachelor's house. We'll get the place freshened up and redecorated, and leave Mrs. Wootten to make her own sweeping reforms. It will give her something to do."

"It will also give Wootten something to do," Allerton observed. "She'll sweep him into another house and want to get all new stuff, I expect."

"Well, he can afford it."

"Yes, I wasn't considering the expense; that will be the least part of the inconvenience." He placed a hand on the closed case of a small organ, which occupied an entire side wall of the sitting-room and gave it a heavy, overcrowded appearance. "This good companion of his solitary evenings will find its nose out of joint. I've never passed the house of an evening that I haven't seen the back of Fred's head and shoulders as he sat before this thing and played hour after hour."

"He'll play for her now," she said. "Why not?"

Allerton grinned.

"If she's all he says she is," he replied, "he'll find more interesting things to do than that."

After their inspection of the house, Mrs. Allerton accompanied her husband down town to give him the benefit of her advice in the selection of wallpapers and colouring, and then left him to it while she went on to a furnishing store and ordered a few essentials for the improvement of the Wootten establishment.

On her return, while passing the doors of a cafe in the main street, a good-looking man in the twenties stepped smartly on to the pavement and waylaid her.

"What luck, meeting you Mrs. Allerton!" he said. "Do come inside and have an iced drink. I was just on my way there."

"No thanks. I'm going straight up."

She shook hands with him, and the young man turned and walked beside her along the pavement, which at that hour was fairly thronged. He was in Mr. Wootten's business. Mrs. Allerton, meeting the frank eyes, with their expression of undisguised pleasure, wondered whether he had heard the news, and de-

cided that he had not. She forthwith imparted it. Densham looked amazed. Since the information came from the source whence it did he could not discredit it; but it took him a few seconds to digest it.

"Well, he might have cabled us," he said. "No one in the office knows."

"Don't you think perhaps he is feeling just a little shy about it? You might spread the news—tactfully."

"Yes, of course. Upon my soul! I don't see why it should so surprise me. The baas doesn't seem cut out for a marrying man—I suppose that's it. Anyway, he's all right and deserves all the luck he gets. I shall try for a rise on the strength of this."

"Your calculating selfishness is significant of the times," she remarked.

"Well, I want to get married also," he protested.

Mrs. Allerton laughed pleasantly. His devotion to her younger half-sister was an open secret.

"Come up and dine with us this evening," she said "only ourselves. I have some new photographs of Beryl which arrived yesterday. There are so many of them, I can't believe she meant me to keep them all. You shall give me your opinion of them."

"That's awfully good of you," he said, his whole face alight with interest and pleased anticipation. "You've always been no end of a brick. When is Miss Raymond coming down to the coast again?"

"Oh, I expect it won't be very long before she decides in favour of a change. She prefers town life to a farm."

"That's not to be wondered at," he returned, with a note of satisfaction in his voice. "It must be precious slow for a girl on a farm."

"Some girls wouldn't agree with you. I loved it always; I do still. But then I was never very keen on towns. It's a matter of temperament. Beryl enjoys crowds. She's a restless soul."

"She is a dear," he said quietly, with so much of earnest sincerity in his tones that Mrs. Allerton liked him the more for his ready championship of a girl who, with the light-hearted heedlessness of youth, treated him sufficiently capriciously to alienate any but a very steadfast affection.

She parted from him outside the Town Hall. He called a taxi for her and saw her into it before separating from her. He had a very warm liking for Mrs. Allerton, apart from his wish to be connected with her by marriage. She was a woman whom many men liked and all men respected. She had always been popular, and her popularity gained instead of waning with the passing years.

He shut the door on her and stood back. As he did so a man crossed the square and came towards them, a handsome man, with a certain recklessness in his expression and a boldness in the fine eyes which were fixed on Mrs. Allerton's face with a hint of a smile in them—a smile which finished there and left the rest of his face perfectly grave. Mrs. Allerton bowed with a slight distance of manner in response to his salute. Then the taxi whirled past, and both men were left looking after it through the dust cloud which it raised.

The newcomer joined Densham and kept pace at his side.

"This is the damndest hole," he said, "and the least exciting of any of the rotten towns in this putrid country."

"When the option is yours, why live in hell?" Densham asked drily.

"There is no option," the other returned. "If I had the brains to make my way elsewhere, do you imagine I should be satisfied to broil?"

"I imagine you would grumble wherever you were," the younger man retorted, ignoring the reference to a lack of brains, which he felt no desire to question.

Trevor smiled.

"Boredom," he explained. "The first man ran foul of his destiny from the same cause. It isn't sufficient, you see, to place a man in a garden with one woman. As an experiment it may answer well enough; but the man desires to explore further—naturally. Frustrate him, and he's up against it all the time. . . . Did it ever strike you how few beautiful women there are in this place? The handsomest girl in town serves in a shop—you've doubtless discovered that fact for yourself—the coldest has just driven up the hill; for the rest, they're mediocre."

"I don't set up to be a connoisseur," Densham observed drily. "When I meet a nice woman I like her; looks don't bother me. When I like her I don't discuss her."

Trevor ignored the rebuff. He glanced sideways at his companion's annoyed face and pulled at his upper lip to conceal an involuntary smile.

"That's all very well," he rejoined. "But it's a bit off when she don't like you in return. Coming inside?" He nodded in the direction of the cafe outside which Densham had met Mrs. Allerton. "There is a little girl in here who looks for me at about this time. If I

am not in a hurry I wait until she is free to serve me. She is like a peach which is ripened by the sun."

"I seem to have heard that somewhere before," Densham said. "No; I am not going in. I have to get back to the office. We are short-handed. The baas comes out at the end of the month, you know—with his wife."

"*What?*" exclaimed the other, and halted on the pavement in his amazement. "With *whose* wife?"

"His own, of course."

"You're kidding me. Wootten isn't married."

"Isn't he? I'm under the impression that he has been married a month. They are on their way out, anyhow."

He turned away and left the other man to think over the news which he had started to spread tactfully, according to his idea of the meaning of the word.

CHAPTER IV.

GEORGE ALLERTON sailed for England a week before the arrival of the Woottens. A south-east gale was raging on the day of departure which prevented Mrs. Allerton from going on board to see the last of him. She took leave of him on the jetty, and remained watching the launch with its freight of passengers pitching heavily in the sullen sea as it steamed its difficult course towards the mail-boat.

The sky was overcast and angry, and the moist atmosphere was charged with salt stickiness which the wind carried in its breath from the fret of the sea. The stickiness was everywhere, like a blight; and the sullen sound of the sea smote the ear with a dull insistence above the clamour of the wind. It was vile weather in which to make the journey round the coast.

Maud Allerton shivered while she stood on the pier-head in the teeth of the gale and watched the bobbing speck on the foam-flecked water as it travelled farther and farther from the shore, ploughing its way bravely through the waves, occasionally dipping from sight altogether in the trough of the sea. She felt apprehensive, why, she did not know. She had seen the sea in this mood often, when communication with the shore was difficult, and sometimes impracticable; beyond being impressed with its grandeur she could not recall ever being troubled by the sight of it thus before. Her hus-

band was a good sailor; he would suffer no greater inconvenience from the rough sea than a possible drenching. The deck of the launch was awash and the spray flew over her funnel. She could see him standing beside the man at the wheel behind the weather screen, dodging the spray at intervals when it came above the screen. The mail-boat was berthed farther out than any of the other shipping; before the launch reached it it was but a black speck on the water, its human freight indistinguishable to the naked eye.

Maud Allerton turned slowly and retraced her steps along the jetty. She had seen her husband off several times in similar fashion, and this was the only occasion on which she regretted that she was not accompanying him. An unaccustomed feeling of loneliness troubled her. For the first time in her life she realised the actuality of parting. If anything happened to him, if he never returned to her, she knew that for her the best would be gone from life.

She tried to free her mind from these morbid reflections, ascribing her depression to the roughness of the weather. Three months would pass speedily: she had endured a longer separation without any of the misgivings she experienced now.

She wondered why she had consented to his going alone. He had not, she recalled on thinking the matter over, asked her to accompany him. He had stated that he needed a holiday, and would combine business with pleasure and take a trip home. That he should propose, and she accept, this arrangement as a matter of course struck her now as significant of a subtle change in their relations, denoting a tendency to drift towards a state of indifference. That would be a fatal error. Marriage,

like every other relationship in life, calls for constant vigilance and continued self-forgetfulness to make it anything like the ideal state it should be. Love is not a hardy, it is a responsive, plant. Tend it diligently, and it flourishes; neglect it, and it wilts like a blossom stricken by drought.

"I have taken things too much for granted," Mrs. Allerton mused on the way back. "I think perhaps I have been just a little neglectful. Men—my man, anyway—like to be studied. And I haven't studied him particularly." She smiled involuntarily. "I have behaved towards him always as if he were a reasonable grown-up human being—and he isn't."

The next day she wrote to her young sister and invited down to help her through the period of her grass-widowhood, an arrangement which suited Miss Beryl Raymond admirably. She overhauled her scanty wardrobe, selected the best she possessed, and, with a quiet confidence in her married sister's resourcefulness in supplementing the outfit started without delay for the coast with the definite intention of enjoying herself.

Beryl was pretty, small and fair, with hair which waved naturally, and large, darkly blue eyes. She was eighteen, and rather spoilt, as the youngest member of a large family is apt to become,—a bright, popular young woman, with more than a tinge of the hardness that belongs to youth, that forms part of the protective armour of youth, and should therefore be suffered as a useful asset among the more agreeable of youthful qualities.

She arrived two days after her brother-in-law's departure. Mrs. Allerton welcomed her warmly and made much of her. The girl, accustomed to being petted, ac-

cepted these attentions very much as her due. She made it quite clear from the start that she expected to have a good time.

"Now," she said, with considerable stress on the word, as, seated on the side of her sister's bed on the night of her arrival, she combed her curls with great deliberation and prepared for a confidential talk, "you've got to give me the time of my life. I want to get married. I'm sick of the farm. I want a home of my own. And I'm going to fix things up this trip. You've got to help me—buy me clothes and take me about and entertain and all that."

"Oh," Mrs. Allerton laughed, "I didn't know you were feeling that way. But I've prepared ahead. Jack Densham is the happy possessor of one of your photographs."

"Oh, Jack!" The girlish voice was carelessly disparaging. "I don't know that I am particularly keen on Jack having my photograph. I don't want to be monopolised. I'm going to have a look round."

"Well, don't play with him, and then treat him badly," Mrs. Allerton counselled. "He is very much in earnest. I shouldn't like him to be hurt."

"Men don't bother whether or not they hurt us," returned the eighteen-year-old philosopher.

"I don't see that that is any reason why you should be a little beast," her sister remonstrated.

Beryl laughed.

"On the whole," she said, "I think it is the men who score: the women get let down oftenest."

To which Mrs. Allerton made no reply. She was wondering through what means her sister evolved her views of life.

The business of helping a pretty girl to have "the time of her life," with marriage as her ultimate aim, was no simple undertaking. It left Mrs. Allerton very little leisure to devote to preparing for the Wootten's arrival. And her sister proved in no wise helpful; she was not in the least interested in the middle-aged romance. People should marry while they're young, or not at all, she opined. Mrs. Allerton, therefore, ceased to consult her, and decided to combine the entertainment of her sister with the introduction of Mrs. Fred Wootten to the residents.

The Woottens arrived in the Bay in the early morning. They remained on board for breakfast—a wise course, since the housekeeper was not prepared with breakfast for them; she expected them to lunch, and was concentrating all her energies on that meal.

It was a hot, dusty day. A high wind blew off the shore, raising big clouds of red dust, which almost hid the town, and gave an added appearance or arid desolation to the scene. The first view of this part of the coast is immensely disappointing. Following upon the surprising grandeur of the approach to Table Bay and the beauty of the green, undulating coastline connecting the peninsular with this busy commercial port, the steep red roads, the bare reserve, with its lighthouse and hideous monument, the long, sandy, sterile coastline, convey an almost painful impression of untamed savage austerity fighting drearily against the dogged activities of growing commercial enterprise, of spreading civilisation, with its persistent tendency to cultivate a beauty which Nature has denied this spot.

There is nothing shoreward to delight the eye of the voyager in this wide, dangerous bay; there is just the

blue of the sea and the blue of the sky, the light and colour of the atmosphere, and the soft shades on the water when the sun dips into the sea. To the unwilling traveller this place stands for exile: there is no welcome from shore, no ease for the tired brain and tired eye. That behind the ugliness lie unsuspected beauties is no sort of comfort to the lonely heart looking for something which it cannot find.

CHAPTER V

A MAN and woman leaned upon the rail of the ship and gazed shoreward. They spoke little; the man because he found nothing to say in face of that dust-hidden aridity, the woman because she dared not give utterance to the emotions which stirred her at this first sight of her new home, lest she hurt the feelings of the man who leaned on the rail beside her looking out across the dazzling water towards the land with a new light of criticism in his eyes.

He had never observed before that the approach from the sea was unlovely. He had not, as a matter of fact, considered the place from an artistic point of view. The bay was wide, a fine open sweep of sea, and the port was about the busiest on the coast; it was a growing, improving, flourishing town. He liked it. He enjoyed the sight of the busy launches, with their trails of heavily laden lighters, putting off from the jetty, bearing the export trade of the country to the ships lying off in readiness to receive it. He enjoyed watching the stuff taken aboard—bales upon bales of hides being lifted by the noisy winches from the lighters and dropped into the holds. He did not dislike the strong smell of the hides. These things symbolised prosperity, labour, enterprise. By these means he had grown wealthy, to these things, had he carried the thought further, he owed the wife who stood beside him, staring

with wide, fascinated eyes upon the scene. With many cargoes of these self-same bales of hides he had bought her as surely as any Kaffir bought his dusky bride with so many head of cattle or other goods. And he did not know it. It never occurred to him that the woman had sold herself. She had struck a definite bargain with him with a definite purpose in view. But she locked these things in her breast, as she locked away now the emotions that stabbed her into silence before the desolation of the windswept scene.

"How it blows!" she said after a while, and put up a hand to push back the red-brown hair from her eyes.

"Yes," he said, "we get plenty of wind on the coast. But the wind is a good doctor; it blows away germs."

"It would blow away anything, a wind like this," she returned with a brief laugh. "As for germs, there appears to be a red cloud of them. Does it always blow here?"

"Oh no," he answered reassuringly; "we average at most about four days a week high wind."

"How you must enjoy the remaining three days!" she said drily.

The captain of the ship came along the deck and paused for a few minutes beside her. He handed his glasses to her.

"Like to have a nearer view of the shore?" he asked. "Can't see much for dust to-day."

Mrs. Wootten took the glasses and adjusted the focus to suit her.

"It's—interesting," she said.

"It's all right when you get ashore," remarked Wootten, with what sounded like a faint note of apol-

ogy in his voice. "You can't judge of the place until you get on the hill."

He moved away, and went below to see after their baggage. Mrs. Wootten lowered the glasses, and returned them.

"I can see all I want to see without these," she said.

The captain turned his back to the shore and leaned on the rail facing her. Most men would have done the same; she was so infinitely better worth looking at.

"It's a God-forsaken hole," he said.

She drew a long breath that was almost a sigh, then, with a little humorous twist of the lips, she looked him squarely in the eyes.

"Dear Heaven!" she murmured. And added: "What on earth is a woman to do in a town where it blows like this four days out of the seven?"

"I expect you'll find plenty to amuse you," he returned consolingly. "And, as your husband says, it is pretty enough on the hill. I think I have never seen prettier gardens anywhere than in Port Elizabeth."

"Gardens! Do you mean Botanic gardens?"

"No. The Park's all right, though. I referred to private gardens."

"Oh!" she said. "If I have a pretty garden that will be good, at least."

She did not, the captain noticed—and he had noticed the same omission often during the voyage—use the plural pronoun, as most brides do; she never coupled herself with her husband in her conversation. He sometimes wondered whether the omission was deliberate or accidental.

He had known Wootten for years. The man had travelled with him before. And he had never been

more surprised over anything than when Wootten came up to him at the beginning of the voyage with the information that he had his wife on board. When he saw the wife, his surprise at the marriage changed to sheer wonderment at the beauty of the bride: he had never in all his life beheld such provocative beauty before, and he had enjoyed a fairly varied experience of beautiful women during his career aboard the big passenger steamships that ply the Cape route. Now, while he leaned towards her, watching her curiously, something that was akin to pity touched him—pity for her youth and for her loneliness. It was as plain to him as if she had laid bare those secrets that she kept locked within her breast that she had nothing in common with her middle-aged husband; two people more oddly assorted and ill matched he could not imagine.

The Woottens went ashore in the first launch that came alongside after breakfast. Wootten, carrying his wife's dressing-case, preceded her down the gangway. He was nervous and inclined to fuss. Mrs. Wootten, tenderly guarded by the chief officer, with an eager sailor at the foot of the gangway, ready to hand her, or lift her if necessary, into the bobbing launch, and with a quartermaster hovering jealously in the rear, followed him reluctantly. She had liked the life on board ship; she liked these kindly men who had helped to make the voyage pleasant to her. She felt as though she were leaving home and friends to follow a stranger into exile among alien and unsympathetic conditions.

She held tightly to the chief officer's arm to steady herself on the swaying gangway, as the launch lifted on a wave and jammed against the ship's ladder. She saw her husband jump and miss his footing and tumble

ignominiously into the launch, where a good-natured, red-faced man in a greasy shirt of striped flannel obligingly righted him and dropped him on to a seat. The same amiable person held out his hand to her.

"Don't be in a hurry, miss. Watch your opportunity," he called up to her.

And she saw the launch receding, falling, falling, while the gangway seemed to rise far above it out of the water; and she stood clinging to the chief officer's arm, and staring at the tiny bald patch in the middle of her husband's head, and wishing he would put on his hat.

"It's rough, isn't it?" she said to the officer.

"A bit of a swell on," he answered. "You'll find it doesn't amount to much when you get clear of the ship. Now's your time. Don't hurry."

He shouldered the sailor out of the way, and, clinging with one hand to the rope, held on with the other to his charge until she reached the deck of the launch and was grabbed by the man in the greasy shirt. Then he sprang back and ran up a few steps to escape the wave that dashed over the bottom of the gangway and took the pipe-clay off his shoes. He waved his hand to her, and she made use of one of the pretty actions so entirely characteristic and pleasing, because unstudied, which endeared her to many people: she put her two fingers to her lips and looked up at him with the most alluring smile in the world. He stood at the top of the gangway and watched her, with a heart that beat a little faster than ordinarily and with a hungry look in his blue eyes, while the space between the ship and the launch widened as the latter got away with her freight and headed for the shore.

Mrs. Wootten's gaze detached itself from the ship only when it failed any longer to recognise the friendly faces that had lined up to watch the disembarkation of the most popular passenger of the voyage. Reluctantly her gaze travelled shoreward. They were nearing the jetty. The sight of the heavy cranes at work, and the lighters alongside, filled with dark-skinned, jabbering natives, the hot sun streaming on their naked shoulders till they shone like well-oiled bronze, held her attention for a while. These things had lost something of their novelty, but they were still sufficiently unfamiliar to prove arresting to the girl travelling amid foreign scenes for the first time in her life.

The launch drew alongside, and Wootten, with a show of being helpful, put a hand under his wife's elbow and assisted her to the steps. Instinctively she turned to the man in the flannel shirt, who, with a greasy hand extended to her, remarked to Mr. Wootten:

"It's all right, sir; I'll take care of the lady."

"I can manage," Wootten said fussily. "I can manage."

"Better let me, miss," the man said; and Mrs. Wootten put a hand into his with absolute confidence in his ability to land her without mishap, which he did.

The power of the sun was intense, early though it was. The planks struck hot through her thin shoes when, climbing the steps of the jetty, she stood for a moment at the top looking through the wide gaps at the green-blue water lapping against the barnacled supports and washing over the lower steps. The tar between the seams of the planks was oozing stickily in the heat.

She went and stood in the shade of a small wood and iron office while her husband saw about getting their baggage through the Customs. Never in all her life had she felt so utterly forlorn as she felt then, standing amid the noise and heat and welter, adrift from every familiar thing, with all of the past which she cared for left behind, and ahead of her, life with a man whom she did not love in an uncongenial land.

CHAPTER VI.

DURING the drive up to the house Wootten was conscious of two things—the growing and increasingly awkward silences, and his own intense nervousness. He was so eager that his wife should be favourably impressed with her new surroundings, and so painfully alive to the fact that she was not so impressed, that for the first time he began to see things from a critical and dispassionate point of view; and he admitted to himself that there had been nothing so far likely to charm the eye or rest the senses: it had been all heat and bustle and noise; and now that this was left behind there was still the heat and glare, and a dust, which stung as it blew in their faces, and lay grittily upon the cushions and floor of the taxi which toiled up the steep, shadeless road.

But on the top of the hill the roads stretched restful and pleasing—long avenues of roads, lined with the flowering gum and other curious trees, with a vista of blue sea in the distance, and with houses lying back on either side in brilliantly flowered gardens, the riot of colour harmonising with the gold of the sunlight, with the rich red earth, and the clear, hard blue of sea and sky, a sky in which no cloud showed, and which scarcely lightened in colour even where it touched the horizon.

When they were on top of the hill Wootten looked

into his wife's face eagerly, and noted with satisfaction the light of newly-awakened interest in the warm brown eyes—eyes which caught and reflected the ruddy lights in the glorious, richly tinted hair—soft, melting eyes, the expression which varied with every mood of their owner, and which were sometimes earnest and gravely tender, and at others wells of merriment in which laughter played incessantly, as sunlight plays in a pool. At the present moment they were simply intent and deeply interested.

It was strange and immensely attractive to her, this land of heat and alien people, of curious vegetation, and crude and splendid colouring, and rugged, unfamiliar scenery. Viewed under different conditions, the sensuous warmth, the light and the colour, would have gratified her senses and appealed to the rich romantic strain in her nature; but with the kindly, commonplace features of her husband so near to her, the hot feel of his clothes in contact with her, all the romance faded. She was conscious of the discomfort of the heat and the dust, conscious too of those watchful, wistful eyes seeking hers while she sought to evade them; and a feeling of almost intolerable irritation swept over her, which, with great difficulty, she repressed.

"It will be good to get in out of the glare," she said. "Have we much farther to go?"

"No," he answered. "There is the Park. We bear round to the right."

"It's beautiful up here," she said. . . . "Shady. I like the trees. What is the statue?—A war memorial, I suppose?"

"Of the Boer War—yes."

She surveyed the bronze figure of the kneeling soldier with curiosity. It was a fine piece of work. The grouping of the horse with its owner giving it water was extraordinarily natural.

"If I had looked closer I should have known it had no connection with the late war," she said, "because the soldier wears a moustache. The modern soldier is mostly clean-shaven."

He felt his own moustache a little doubtfully; he was not sure, but he fancied that her tone had reflected disparagingly on the fashion of the moustache.

"Of course," he said. "I hadn't noticed that."

The taxi turned into the quiet, unfashionable by-road known as Park Lane, and stopped before a little house with a dull little garden in front and a patch of ground at the rear that was scarcely big enough to be called a garden, and went by the name of yard. Except that this house was better kept than the neighbouring houses, and the garden, such as it was, was neat, with clipped hedges and well-gravelled path, there was nothing about it to suggest the wealth of its owner. Wootten had bought it years before, fitted it with electric light and a bathroom and everything needful for his individual comfort and settled down in it to a bachelor existence. He had not contemplated marriage, and the house satisfied his requirements. He had not, when he surprised himself, as well as other people, by falling in love and marrying forthwith, given a thought to the suitability or unsuitability of the house; that one other person could make a considerable difference in a household never occurred to him. His wife was poor: he had taken her from mean surroundings; that she would expect more than he provided did not strike him

until after he alighted and assisted her to alight from the taxi before settling with the driver. Then he became aware of the blank amaze in her eyes, and, following the direction of their gaze, saw that they were fixed bewilderingly upon the modest front of his dwelling.

"But—is this where you live?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered rather shortly.

There was nothing more to be said in front of the driver. Wootten went up the few feet of path and rang the bell, and almost instantly a Kaffir servant came out and went to the cab to fetch the baggage. Behind him appeared the housekeeper, severely respectful, but obviously antagonistic, and nervously uncertain as to the correct method of procedure. Mrs. Wootten solved that. She smiled, the disarming, irresistible smile that won for her many hearts, and held out her hand with a simply-worded greeting.

Mrs. Martin unbent sufficiently to be equal to a polite response; but the beauty and youth of her employer's wife disconcerted her. She had expected to see a woman of mature years; and instead Mr. Wootten, like so many men who marry late in life, had married a girl in the twenties. Whether he expected the girl to adapt herself to his simple mode of living, or whether he purposed adapting himself to the more exacting demands of youth, remained to be seen; but it was very evident to the housekeeper that drastic changes were impending, before which some one's prejudices would have to give way. It occurred to her that the period of her service there was drawing to a close.

Wootten put a hand through his wife's arm and drew her into the sitting-room and closed the door.

He had intended to take her in his arms and kiss her, but something in the expression of the beautiful aloof eyes deterred him. He felt that she would be surprised at such a demonstration. She was not thinking of him; she was intent on her surroundings, and, as he saw by the blank astonishment of her look, was manifestly disappointed in everything.

"And this is where you live!" she said slowly, and moved away from him towards the window, where she stood looking out with her back towards him. "I hoped there would be a garden."

"We can move," he said in a flattened voice, "if you don't like it. It was big enough for me."

She swung round then with a radiant smile, and her laugh, soft, melodious, and clear, rang out and filled the room with unexpected music.

"Move! Why, of course. That would be great fun!"

She advanced to the organ, which remained open, as the tuner had left it on the previous day, and laid her fingers lightly on the stops.

"This evening I will have some music," she said. "Do you know, I've never heard you play. I'll have to sit outside on the verandah to listen; this room is too small for such an instrument. When you move you must have one big room for it—oh, ever so big a room!"

"I think I had better buy some land and build," he said; "then we can have everything according to your wishes."

"I haven't any wishes—only to please you," he said.

A faint colour came into her cheeks, and a misty

brightness like unshed tears suffused the shining eyes. She moved aside suddenly and sat down.

"And I'm so difficult to please," she said. "I've given you proof of that ever since the honeymoon. Put a beggar on horseback. . ." She struck the cushion of the chair with swift impatience and emitted a little bitter laugh. "After all, why not? The beggar's lot is hard. It is not surprising that when he gets the chance he goes to the other extreme. I've never had money; I've never been able to fulfil any single one of my wishes. Now I want to gratify every wish that presents itself. And you can do it . . . you are so rich. It is wonderful to be rich like that."

He gazed at her like a man petrified. He had never heard her talk in that strain before. It astonished him. So little did he know of the woman whom he had married that the last thing he would have believed likely to attract her was money. Her talk jarred him unpleasantly.

"It isn't wonderful at all," he said. "There is no gratification in spending beyond the limit of one's needs. I have faced life as a poor man. It is quite as full of interest when one is uncertain of one's next meal."

"For a man—without dependents—perhaps," she allowed.

She was not looking at him; she was gazing with averted face out through the open window. The graceful poise of her partly turned head, with the long line of her shoulder, was not lost upon him. She was the most gracefully feminine type of woman he had ever beheld.

"The uncertainty of meals is not interesting when

one watches those one loves suffer; it becomes a tragedy," she said in quiet tones. "Life is tragic. We laugh—we have to laugh in order to conceal the tears. We go on laughing." She faced about and leaned back in her chair and looked up at him, where he stood watching her, with her haunting, smiling eyes lifted to his unsmiling face. "Why not? It is pleasant to smile. And tears are unbecoming. Besides, smiles win friends, tears never do. I could not live without love."

"I don't suppose that ever you will be called upon to make the experiment," he said.

He crossed to her side, and stood with a hand on her shoulder, keeping slightly behind her so that she could not see his face.

"I am not very young, Gerda," he said; "I think sometimes I must seem very old to you. If occasionally I appear unsympathetic, if I do not always understand, I want you to bear in mind the difference in our ages and be patient with me. I'll learn in time to understand. I want you to be happy. That's all I ask; that you shall be happy with me. Give me your confidence, and I will try to deserve it."

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. ALLERTON called informally upon the bride on the afternoon of her arrival. She experienced an immense curiosity to see Mrs. Fred Wootten; though it was less the gratification of this curiosity than a desire to show some kindness towards the wife of her husband's friend that moved her to make the visit so soon. A woman new to the country might feel strange and a little homesick at first; she was desirous of making her welcome.

What she was prepared for when she reached the house and was admitted she scarcely knew; it was certainly not for what she saw: her wildest imagining could not have conceived this winsomely beautiful girl, whose skin was like nothing so much as the petal of a blush rose, while her hair suggested the glory of autumn leaves with the sun upon them.

The room was empty when she was shown in. Mrs. Wootten came in almost immediately, closing the door behind her, and standing for a moment facing the light, scrutinising her visitor intently.

Mrs. Allerton was too completely taken by surprise to make any advance. She had a sense of unreality while confronted with the extraordinary charm, the loveliness of this unexpected apparition. She had come meaning to be kind and helpful, expecting to be a little bored, and amiably determined to conceal the

fact; and instead she stood spellbound before this stranger, younger than herself and entirely more self-possessed.

"It's kind of you to come so soon," a sweet voice said, breaking the silence. "I've heard a lot about you. I know you quite well. I hoped you would call soon. It is terribly lonely, landing in a strange country where there is no one one has known before."

She smiled into Mrs. Allerton's eyes. Mrs. Allerton found herself holding in a protective sort of way the small hand which had slipped so confidently into hers. She still held it when she seated herself beside the other on the small sofa. Gerda withdrew it of her own accord after they sat down.

"I'm glad Mr. Wootten 'explained' me," Mrs. Allerton said. "It's an introduction. We have known him so long. It was immensely interesting to us to hear of his marriage. I've been ever so curious to see you. You don't mind my confessing to that?"

"Oh, no! Why should I? I expect I should have felt curiosity also in similar circumstances. Why is it one is interested in such stupid event as marriage and birth and death? We never tire—do we?—of these commonplace things."

"They stand for life—I suppose that's why."

"They stand for mischief," Gerda rejoined with a little laugh.

She made a pretty, careless gesture as though to dismiss the subject.

"Let us discuss anything but the human problem. I do not like to be serious. Life is pleasant just so long as we treat it as a jest. Do you know, I'm homesick. I miss the ship and the people. My heart is

torn into fragments and distributed among half a dozen persons on board. I want to go back and collect the pieces. She lies out there in the bay, my ship; and I cannot see her even from here. Have you a view of the sea from your house?"

"Just a peep," Mrs. Allerton said. "We are rather far round the Park. You must come and see. Could you manage to-morrow? I have some people coming for tennis and croquet in the afternoon. You will meet a few of your neighbours if you come."

"A party!" The brown eyes were alight and eager. "Of course I'll come. Yes, that will be lovely! You've got a beautiful garden, haven't you? I was so disappointed to find none here. Fred talks of building. I don't know . . . I don't believe he likes the idea of moving a bit. But——" She glanced round the ugly little room, and her eyes were eloquent of their owner's distaste. "I should find it interesting to watch my plans taking form out of a lumber of bricks and mortar," she added. "Just to state one's wishes, and have them carried out! It sounds like magic to me, who have cherished endless wishes always and been unable to fulfil them."

"You will find that you will cease to have wishes when the gratification of them becomes easy," Mrs. Allerton observed. "The keenness of desire for the unattainable appears to be one of the laws of life."

Mrs. Wootten sat back with her hands clasped tightly together in her lap and stared at her visitor.

"You too!" she said, with the abrupt change from lightness of manner to unusual earnestness so characteristic of her. "I've heard that elsewhere—or some-

thing like it—the worthlessness of realised ambition. We want things intensely, and when they come to us, very often they come too late: we don't want them any more. There is a Chinese proverb which puts it very aptly: 'Almonds come to those who have no teeth.' That's life. The good things come to us when we are past caring. When we cannot enjoy, Fate yields to us what she has withheld too long."

It occurred to Mrs. Allerton, looking into the deeply stirred face, with its haunting, expressive eyes, that life must have dealt hardly with this girl to move her to such bitter philosophy. Her own words, whatever they might have conveyed to the impressionable mind of her listener, had carried no such hopeless interpretation as had been put on them: there was nothing jaundiced in Mrs. Allerton's view of life.

"I shouldn't like to think that," she said. "It sounds to me rather like truth distorted. The element of truth in it makes it difficult to refute."

Gerda flashed one of her swift, bewildering smiles on the speaker, and her serious mood passed with it as a cloud passes from a summer sky. No mood held long with her.

"After all, it is just a question of adaptability," she said. "That old Chinese person should procure artificial teeth. When our genuine emotions are exhausted we can resort to artificial stimulus and cheat Fate, and so contrive still to laugh at life. Tell me what you do in this hot, windy place besides play tennis."

"Some people play bridge a lot," Mrs. Allerton said, and, observing Gerda's expression, added: "That doesn't appeal to you. You don't care for cards?"

"No. I cannot concentrate my entire attention on

any game. And to sit in a room—in a country like this! Besides, I like people. I want to talk.”

“The gymkhana comes off next week. If you care for horse-racing you will enjoy it. Mr. Densham, one of the men in your husband’s business, is riding. It adds an interest when one knows the jockeys.”

“Yes.” Gerda looked pleased. “I must make his acquaintance in advance, then I can back his mount. I shall like that.”

“You will meet him to-morrow; he is coming for tennis.”

“But that will be nice. Do you know, I believe I am going to like this place. And this morning when I landed and stood on that hot, noisy jetty,—before landing, when I watched the shore from my porthole while I was dressing—I had a sinking here.” She touched her breast lightly with her hand. “A curious persuasion that these shores held sorrow and no happiness for me gripped me. Ah! you think me foolish And I am foolish—to let my feeling run away with me. But do you never have those curious premonitions yourself? They may be all wrong—quite likely they are. They are due to so many causes—the influence of the moment, of one’s surroundings—over which one has no control. I think, perhaps, I was just homesick. I have never been out of England before.”

Abruptly Mrs. Allerton realised that she knew nothing about this girl beyond the fact that she was Fred Wootten’s wife. She had no knowledge of her home, of whether there were any near relatives from whom she was recently parted. She did not like to inquire. Something—a shadow, which passed almost as it came

into the soft eyes—warned her that this might be painful ground.

She was spared the necessity of replying by the entrance of Mr. Wootten. He came in looking elated and a little self-conscious, and greeted the visitor with a cordiality which his wife witnessed with surprise. She had never seen him so nearly effusive before.

Mrs. Allerton thought him looking well. He appeared younger and more alert since his marriage.

"It is delightful of you to drop in on us to-day," he said. "There is a loose-end sort of feeling when one is just off the ship. I am afraid Gerda has been wishing herself back. The wind and the dust annoy her. It is rather a rotten day on which to land. I hope you have convinced her that it isn't always like this."

"Mrs. Allerton has convinced me that it is quite a desirable spot," Gerda interposed. "I am not discontented any more."

"You have worked a miracle," he said, and smiled as he met Maud Allerton's eyes. "I received a Marconi from George two days before we got into Cape Town. It was my first intimation that he was on the road home. So you are all alone?"

"I am a grass-widow. I am scarcely alone," she corrected—"my sister, Beryl, is staying with me. George will be away three months—if not longer."

"I wonder you didn't go too," Wootten said.

"Oh, well! there are the children. It is not easy to get away. He needed a holiday."

Wootten assuaged. Knowing the Allertons intimately, as he did, it was always a matter of surprise to him that they should take their holidays indepen-

dently in this manner. He had known it happen before.

Mrs. Wootten listened with considerable interest to the conversation. She wondered what George Allerton was like, and why he took his holiday without his wife. Judging from the smiling unconcern of Mrs. Allerton's manner she did not appear to mind. Apparently they were not especially devoted. She did not believe it when her husband assured her later, in response to her outspoken criticism, that the Allertons were a particularly well-suited couple and the most happily married people of his acquaintance. Any dull married life that was outwardly amiable would appear to him an ideal relationship. But her intuition told her that in a marriage in which there remained any glamour of romance, to the husband as to the wife, voluntary separation would be unthinkable.

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. FRED WOOTTEN created something of a sensation on her appearance at the garden-party which Mrs. Allerton had arranged for the purpose of introducing her locally, and at which all the principal residents were present.

She arrived with her husband, who, obviously out of his element, attended such functions merely as a matter of necessity; they were part of the due he paid for the possession of a young wife. During the period of his bachelorhood he had never been seen at any festive gathering. He was a man of methodical habits, whose chief interest had been his business, and whose little leisure was spent at the club. His marriage would alter that in a measure; the club would see little of him in future, and his business would engross him less. But it was not to be expected that at his age a man could overcome his prejudices against social gatherings of this description to the extent of cultivating a liking for them. He accompanied Gerda now, but the time would come, and he knew it, when he would rebel against this obligation.

On arrival he was speedily separated from his wife, who, a radiant figure in white, and looking amazingly youthful beside her middle-aged husband, became immediately the centre of interest. He saw her, whenever his wandering gaze singled her out, surrounded

by young people, and always the group in which she appeared was the gayest present. The sight of her, of her light-hearted youth, and the youthful element which congregated about her, caused him a stab of envy. It brought home to him with disquieting force how little they had in common—he staid and middle-aged, she in the full flush of triumphant, exuberant youth. He drifted unobtrusively to a quiet corner of the garden where, outside it all, he could sit and watch the games and remain unmolested.

Gerda, meanwhile, queened it near the tennis court. She did not play. She confessed that she had not been brought up to play games. Many of the men, who before her arrival had been keen to take part in this most popular form of exercise, now pronounced the day too hot for such exertion, and sat about in the shade of the trees beneath which she held her court.

Beryl and Jack Densham swelled this group. The young girl was insensibly attracted by the brilliant stranger, while the man, manifestly fascinated, showed for the first time since their acquaintance a diminished interest in the indifferent young person beside him, who had hitherto accepted his devotion lightly and made no adequate return. Gerda eclipsed her. He found himself making invidious comparisons, and wondering why beside the new-comer the other women looked common-place.

When she singled him out and spoke to him directly, he felt immensely proud. She talked to him about the gymkhana, and asked the name of his mount and what his colours were.

“Blue and white,” she said. “That’s pretty—and cool. I shall wear them.”

"Oh, I say! Do you mean it? You'll bring me luck," he cried impulsively.

She laughed at that.

"Luck of a sort, of course. But I do not usually bring good luck. Do not protest—wait and see."

"I wasn't sure that you would be going," he said. "Mr. Wootten isn't keen on these things." He met her eyes and smiled. "It's something new to meet him out at a party."

"People do not care to do these things alone," Gerda said quietly, and steered the talk away from her husband. "What a delightful spot this is!" she exclaimed. "I would like to sit in a garden like this all day and every day . . . sit here alone and watch the shadows from the trees and think."

"You'd find that dull after a while," he said.

"Yes." She looked up, and her eyes sparkled with the light of enjoyment and youth. "I love crowds. The sight of all these people excites me. I am so glad to be here to-day. Tell me, who beside me will wear your colours at the gymkhana?"

Densham reddened awkwardly. He had hoped that Beryl would do so. He had not actually asked her to, but he had intimated to her that such an attention on her part would be appreciated. Whether she would wear them or not remained to be seen.

"It is doubtful if any one else will be so kind," he replied.

But Mrs. Wootten laughed disbelievingly.

"Come! There is some girl you expect to wear your favours. Confess now—or may I guess? I have all my sex's interest in such romances. I could stake my all I am correct in my guess as to who will

wear blue and white at the races. I believe that gazing into the blue of her eyes directed your choice in the matter of colour. Am I not somewhere near the truth?"

His smile was a little sheepish: it, as well as his silence, satisfied Gerda's curiosity. She laughed again ever so softly.

"She is so pretty," she said. "I felt sure that I must be right."

Other people claimed her attention, and she moved away to another part of the garden where was a pond overhung by willows, from the branches of which the finks' nests swung in the light breeze, dipping low till they touched the shadowed surface of the water. Tall grasses grew in the pond, and stiff reeds, and the large blue lily which lifts its head above the water and opens its soft petals to the light.

"Ah!" she cried, "but this is beautiful! When I build my garden I must have a pond like this."

"Better not," some one beside her advised. "I wouldn't have ornamental water on my place. I'd fill this in. Breeds mosquitoes."

She looked at the speaker with wonder-filled eyes.

"Mosquitoes! I would rather be eaten alive by mosquitoes than do away with this pond. It makes of this a dream garden."

"I suppose I am not romantic," her companion said. "I confess mosquitoes interfere with my dreams. Fill that hole in with light, gravelly soil and plant roses—eh? Wouldn't that be pretty?"

"Roses!" She smiled the suggestion aside. "There are roses everywhere. They, too, are beautiful. But here there is just that one piece of cool water; and the birds

drink from it and live above it and love it. No, I would plant no roses here. See!" She turned her head and looked about her, at the cool, green grass and the tall hedges screening this part of the garden from the rest, at the trees which shut in the pond and trailed their drooping branches to the ground. "This is a perfect oasis. There is no colour here—only the blue of the sky and the dappled sunlight and the brilliant plumage of the birds."

"It is pretty, of course," he assented.

"It is restful," she said—"a place to dream in. I have imagined such gardens. I never was in one before. I will have all this—and trees—trees everywhere."

"They don't mature in a few months," he said.

"They must for me. There must be quick-growing kinds." She lifted her wonderful eyes to his. "Leave me my dreams," she said. "I want to believe that all that I wish for will come true."

"I shan't be surprised if it does," he returned, thinking of Wootten's wealth. With unlimited means at one's command the making of a beautiful garden is a comparatively simple task. "I should like to feel as confident in regard to my own dreams."

Mrs. Allerton came up and joined them. Gerda turned to her, her eyes smiling.

"I am just loving your garden," she said—"and envying you. When I go home this evening I shall be so discontented. It will be hot and stuffy in the house, and cramped on the stoep, and so public. I shall think of your pond and the trees and be—oh, quite disagreeable!"

"You must use my garden as often as you like," Mrs. Allerton said, "until you have your own."

"Be careful!" Gerda cried. "You don't know how I may abuse the privilege. I shall possibly live here and go to sleep in one of those fascinating nests. If this were my home I should have my meals out here under the trees."

"Mrs. Wootten doesn't appreciate the many disadvantages of open-air dining in a climate like this," the man who objected to mosquitoes put in.

She made a gesture of protest.

"I am not at enmity with the insect world, as you appear to be," she said. "They don't bite me, those wicked little mosquitoes."

"We do picnic here sometimes," Mrs. Allerton said — "the children and Beryl and I. We make a fire and boil our kettle and cook dampers in the ashes. There is nothing tastes so good as those dampers we make and cook ourselves."

"I should like to do that," Gerda said.

"Then you certainly must do it. It's one way of getting forward with the prescribed peck of dirt."

"In lieu of dampers, let me offer some fruit, or an iced drink," some one suggested, and took Gerda away for refreshment.

Mrs. Allerton looked after her with a long, earnest scrutiny. When she brought her gaze back again, and with it her attention, which had strayed likewise, it was to find the man with whom Gerda had been talking watching her with a somewhat amused expression. They were intimate friends and he felt himself privileged.

"Well!" he said.

She looked inquiry.

"Old Wootten is skulking somewhere in the back-

ground. I saw him before I met his wife. He has taken on a big job."

"He has married a very beautiful and charming girl," Mrs. Allerton said warmly.

He nodded.

"That's what accounts for the dimensions of the job. He's in love—naturally. I wonder whether she is."

"It is not like you to be horrid," she said.

The man, who was called Fielding, smiled.

"He's a fine chap," he said; "I like him."

"Well, of course. I never heard of any one who didn't like Fred Wootten. I think she is a very lucky woman."

"That's not the point, Mrs. Allerton," he returned.

"The question is whether she appreciates the fact."

"I think you are a little hard on her," she said.

"Oh no, I'm not. I'm three parts in love with her myself already."

She laughed pleasantly.

"I'd rather it was you than any one else; you can take such good care of yourself."

"Haven't you heard of the pitcher going to the well once too often?" he asked. "A woman with eyes like that ought to be shut up in a convent."

CHAPTER IX

THROUGH the long hours of the hot afternoon Wootten hovered on the outskirts of the gaiety, waiting for his wife to tire and come away. He saw her from time to time, a bright, animated figure, surrounded always by a little court of gay young folk. He had seen her often so surrounded coming out on board the ship. At first he had been jealous, had felt himself neglected: these people came between him and his wife; they shut her off, made her inaccessible: he had resented it. But after a time, realising her pleasure in her popularity, he began to take a vicarious pleasure in watching her enjoyment. He liked to see her happy. He was glad now to observe her enjoyment; only the circumstances were somewhat different; personal boredom was a condition of watching her present pleasure, and that minimised his satisfaction. Hanging about in this useless fashion struck him as waste of an afternoon.

Once, when he came within touch of her, he asked her whether she were ready to leave. Her amazed eyes answered him without need of words, and he murmured, "All right; no hurry," and moved away with a companion equally out of it with himself.

"Come and have a smoke, Wootten," his friend in adversity said. "There's whisky on the stoep. I can't

get through these social shows without bucking myself up frequently."

"Why do you bother to come?" Wootten asked, readily accompanying him in the direction of the house.

"From the same reason as yourself," the other answered. "The wife makes me."

Wootten became thoughtful. He did not care for the way in which the statement was put. He had not considered his actions as governed other than by his own will: he did not like the idea of any one thinking differently. That, he supposed, was what other people said in regard to his presence there. Certainly he had attended the party on his wife's account, but there had been no compulsion about it.

Gerda was among the last to leave. The party had been breaking up and the guests leaving in batches for some time before she made the welcome announcement that she was ready to go. She looked so extraordinarily happy that he had not the heart let her guess how dull he had been. Somehow, with her beside him, walking across the Park together in the cool of evening, it did not seem to matter greatly what people said in regard to his actions. He was not, after all, a free agent any longer, since it was his will only to do her pleasure. If this sort of thing afforded her amusement then he must put up with being bored.

As an outcome of this resolve, he had no reasonable objection to raise against attending the gymkhana when his wife announced her desire to be present. He had a sufficient reason for not wishing to go. He hated these things. He informed Gerda of the fact; but she laughed his objections aside. He would find it more

amusing than he supposed. And at least he would be in the open air and away from the stuffy old office.

The office was a haven of rest to Wootten during the first few weeks after his return. Every day Gerda was receiving visitors. He got home in the afternoons usually to find his sitting-room overcrowded with people calling upon the bride. Social life was new to him. He supposed that this sort of thing was customary: it was kindly meant; but he wished this invasion of his home would cease. And it did not please him when certain men, who were unmarried and had no feminine relations to introduce to his wife, called upon her. These men were not particular friends of his own; he did not wish to cultivate their acquaintance. When Gerda made it clear to him that he must return all these calls with her, he raised his first forcible but futile objection. He was a busy man; he had no time for such things.

"Just this once," she pleaded. "I could not go alone to the houses where the husbands have called with their wives. Afterwards, it will not matter so much; but these first calls . . ."

He gave way. What else could a man do in face of common sense and courtesy?

It was odd, he reflected, that marriage should so entirely alter a man's mode of life. He had not foreseen this plunge into the social world. He had not supposed that marriage would make any considerable difference to him, beyond the agreeable change of providing him with a dear companion. Had it been possible to persuade Gerda into his simpler way of living he would have endeavoured to do so; but he recognised clearly

that he had married the wrong woman to make this in the least likely; and so relinquished that desire, and sought to adapt himself as far as possible to the changes. Inevitably they would in time pursue their different ways independently; but for the present, despite the drag of the unequal yoke, he kept to the track determinedly beside her.

Under the impression that he would drive alone with his wife to the race-course, Wootten secured two seats in the stand; but at the last moment Gerda informed him that she had accepted Mrs. Allerton's invitation to join her party, which meant that they would make the journey in the Allerton's motor, and watch the races from the carriage enclosure, a more comfortable arrangement, in her opinion, but Wootten, who knew that this would mean being divided from her and elbowed, as it were, into the background, thought of his stand tickets with regret, and passed them on reluctantly to a man in his employ.

Events turned out much as he had anticipated. Mrs. Allerton's car was besieged as soon as it arrived on the ground. It contained three good-looking women, one of whom was pretty and girlish, and one alluringly lovely, with eyes which made a man forget, so Trevor opined, the essential fact that she was married and therefore beyond a man's reach. He proceeded forthwith to monopolise her. He was one of the unencumbered men who had called and whose social overtures Wootten strongly resented. He objected now to his determined shadowing of Gerda. She was rendered conspicuous by his attentions. It vexed him to observe that she did not seem to mind. She allowed him to sit beside her and to arrange bets for her on the

different events. His bantering talk afforded her amusement.

Densham came across from the paddock in riding-breeches and blue and white jacket and cap. Gerda was wearing a blue dress with a cluster of white heather in her belt.

"Your colours!" she said, and touched the heather lightly. "This is for luck."

"It's awfully sweet of you!" he said. "I feel immensely honoured."

"So you ought," she returned, "with two people of the party wearing your colours."

"Two people!" Beryl exclaimed.

Mrs. Wootten smiled.

"Miss Raymond is wishful to make us believe that her appearance all in white is accidental," she said.

"There is no occasion to mar the effect with ribbons when one mirrors heaven's own blue in one's eyes."

Densham looked from the speaker into the eyes under discussion and smiled. Beryl blushed and avoided his gaze.

"I can't very well change the colour of my eyes," she retorted.

"No one would wish you to do that," he said; "they are so pretty."

She turned in her seat and thrust a hand inside the flap pocket and withdrew a blue and white rosette, which she proceeded to fasten to the front of her dress.

"I didn't, you see, give a thought to the colour of my eyes," she said, smiling.

He looked at her very earnestly; then he opened the door and sprang up into the car beside her.

Mrs. Wootten turned an obliging shoulder to them

and engaged in animated conversation with Trevor and one or two men who hovered about the car, attracted by the beauty of the latest importation. Mrs. Allerton was strolling about the enclosure with friends. Every one, save himself, Wootten observed from the outskirts, appeared to be enjoying it. He wondered what was wrong with himself that he found no amusement in this sort of thing. He was bored, and he felt shy and out of it.

Densham's race came off, and the young man left the car, and paused to speak to Wootten in passing.

"Wish me luck, sir," he said, "for the credit of the firm."

"I think it would be to the credit of the firm if we were both at our desks," was the answer.

The young man laughed and hurried across the course; and later Wootten watched him come out from the paddock mounted, and was forced to admit that he cut rather a fine figure in the saddle. Mrs. Wootten leaned towards Beryl, who was watching the various horses as they passed the enclosure with interested eyes, eyes that looked shy when the rider in the blue-and-white tunic trotted past and turned in the saddle to glance in their direction.

"He is the best-looking man on the course," Mrs. Wootten said. She put a hand over the girl's hand in her lap. "It is so good to be young and in love," she murmured. "One doesn't realize how good until —afterwards."

And the girl, listening to her, attracted by the softness of her gaze and the caressing note in her voice, wondered whether she had loved Fred Wootten. It seemed difficult on account of his age to credit that.

Mrs. Allerton returned to the car and got in. She beckoned Wootten to the seat beside her own.

"You must have a good view of this," she said. "We all want Jack to win." She made a laughing remark to her sister over her shoulder. "I feel quite excited," she said.

Beryl felt excited too. She stood on the seat, and cheered and waved her handkerchief as the horses bore down the course, the thud of iron-shod hoofs upon the dry turf sounding above the clamour of voices, above the sound of her own voice as she encouraged the rider whose favours she wore.

And after all he did not win. He came across to the car after the race, crestfallen and apologetic, to receive the condolences of his backers.

"Your mount gave the race away at the start," Beryl said.

Mrs. Wootten leaned towards him, the white heather, which she had taken from her belt, in her hands.

"I told you I did not bring good luck," she said. "You were well mounted, you rode better than those others—yet you lost the race." She dropped the heather over the side of the car. "So much for that!" she said, and looked into his curious face with her laughing eyes.

CHAPTER X.

WOOTTEN bought a piece of land and set about building his house. The plans were drawn up and submitted to Gerda for approval. She was difficult to please; and the architect was kept busy altering and supplementing the original design till there was little of the original left in the final drawings.

While the style of the house remained in indecision, the ground was put under immediate cultivation; and Gerda started to plan the garden which her brain had conceived—a place of surprises and shaded walks, of rare plants and brilliant blooms and wonderful, sloping lawns.

The house started by being a bond of common interest; it became after a while a source of contention between them. Wootten disliked continually altering the plans; his methodical mind was disturbed by his wife's impulsive flights of fancy. Several times he remonstrated with her, and once he lost his temper and they had a scene.

"Do as you like. I don't see the use of being interested in anything," Gerda said. "I thought it was to be my home. We might as well remain here, since this pleases you, and the new house promises to please neither of us."

Wootten had left the house in a rage and gone to the club; and Gerda, left alone, speedily forgot her chargin

in entertaining Mr. Trevor, who, having seen her husband turn in at the club gates as he was starting on his evening ride, took his way past the Cottage, and stopped on some trivial pretext to find out whether Mrs. Wootten were at home.

Gerda received him with marked cordiality and invited him to sit with her on the stoep. She had a feeling that she was getting even with her husband for his recent ill-temper in receiving this man whom she knew he disliked. Immensely flattered with his reception, Trevor seated himself and proceeded to make himself agreeable.

"This is no end of good luck, to find you like this," he said. "I thought you might be up at the new house. I was going to ride out that way and see if I could come across you. You go fairly often, don't you?"

"I fancy we go too often," she said. "We've got bricks and mortar on the brain. We'll be throwing them about soon—bricks, I mean."

"Well, there are plenty to throw. I was up there the other evening having a look round. It will be a fine place when it's finished."

"If ever it is finished." She laughed suddenly. "It is rather like a house fashioned out of a pack of cards. I am continually pulling it down, giving them extra work in putting it together again. Mr. Wootten says the contractor is getting about tired of it. I daresay he is. I am a little weary of it myself. But I started out with great enthusiasm."

"That will revive," he said. "Why not arrange a picnic in the grounds, and invite every one to express an opinion. You'd get quite a unique place if you acted on each suggestion."

Gerda caught on to the idea of the picnic. She discussed it with him in detail. It would be a simple way of returning some of the many invitations which had been showered upon her since Mrs. Allerton started the entertainments. They were still discussing it when Wootten, repenting of his ill-humour, returned unexpectedly and walked on to the stoep, and surprised them with their heads together over a list of names of people which Gerda was compiling under Trevor's advice.

"Let us make a young affair of it," he insisted. "You don't want a lot of these old dears; they would flatten anything. Better keep to our own generation."

He became aware of approaching footsteps, and looked up to discover Wootten standing on the steps, staring at him.

Wootten had seen the man ride past as he entered the club: he knew to within a few minutes how long he had been at the house. An hour had elapsed since he had flung out of it in a temper. It was the first quarrel between himself and Gerda, and it worried him while the breach remained. He had returned in a repentant frame of mind, ready to admit that he was wrong and to give in to her wishes; but the appearance of this man, whom he disliked and whose reputation was none of the best, seated on the stoep, his dark head close to the red-brown hair, exasperated him afresh. Gerda showed a liking for Trevor's company which to Wootten was inexplicable. He would be compelled to warn her against the fellow; she was seeing too much of him. It was less personal jealousy on Wootten's part than jealousy for his young wife's reputa-

tion that moved him to object to this growing intimacy. The man made himself too much at home.

"Going?" he said, as Trevor rose to his feet at his advance.

He made no offer to shake hands, nor did he seat himself. His lack of cordiality left the younger man no choice.

"Yes; I was about to move on," he lied. "We've been planning a picnic. It's going to be great sport. Count upon me as a worker," he added, turning towards Mrs. Wootten, who remained seated, observing the two men curiously as they faced one another on the little stoep. She was perfectly aware of the duel that was taking place, and was entirely indifferent as to its issue. "If you want any help, command my services."

"I will." She laughed softly from the depths of the cane lounge, among the cushions of which she had sunk back with her husband's appearance on the stoep. "You have shown great helpfulness already. After all, the idea was yours, wasn't it?"

"I'm full of ideas of that nature," he said. "The difficulty usually is to get people to catch on. I'll look in again some time during the week and discuss any further developments. I'll take my chance of finding you in."

He leaned over her to shake hands.

"Don't move," he said. "You look so jolly comfortable."

"Good-bye," she said. "Come when you like. I will be pleased to see you."

He had left his horse outside the gate in the shade. Wootten accompanied him along the stoep and re-

mained at the top of the steps looking after him as he descended them and walked with a suggestion of swagger to the gate.

"Insufferable prig!" he muttered, and turned about and returned to where Gerda sat, looking through the dense screen of leaves in the direction of the road.

"He's been here ever since I left, I suppose?" he said.

"He came shortly after you left," she replied. "You haven't been away long. I thought you had gone to the club."

He passed over that, and returned to the subject which mattered to him, mattered tremendously.

"I don't care for you to be friendly with that man," he said. "He's fast. He'll get you talked about. I am telling you because I want you to be careful not to allow the acquaintance to develop."

"I don't think the acquaintance is likely to develop beyond reasonable limits," Gerda answered, surprised. "I would rather judge people as I find them, and not base my opinion on hearsay reputations which are possibly greatly exaggerated. Don't seek to prejudice me because you don't like the man."

Wootten frowned, and leaning with his back against the rail of the stoep, scrutinised his wife closely for a second or so in silence. Then he said, in his peculiar, rather harsh tones—

"I am entirely indifferent in regard to him so long as he does not cross my path. He is a man whom in the ordinary course I seldom meet. We have nothing in common. But I know him; and I have heard him at the club, and elsewhere, boast of his success with women. He has been heard to assert that Mrs. Aller-

ton is the only woman he desired who has resisted him. I don't wish my wife's name coupled with a bounder's like that."

Gerda's soft, warm eyes opened to their fullest. Wootten had succeeded in rousing her interest if he had not greatly impressed her. A faint ripple of amusement crossed her face.

"If that is so, he needs snubbing, that Don Juan," she cried.

"Then I trust," Wootten said, "that you will snub him by not receiving him in future."

"That would be very ineffective," she said. "When I undertake to school a man I do it more thoroughly."

She sat a little straighter, and looked at him reflectively in the short pause that followed.

"It is odd to hear these things about people one knows," she said. "I should have considered that Mrs. Allerton was past being attractive." The tactlessness of this speech struck her as soon as it was uttered: she flushed and quickly averted her gaze. "One always imagines that a woman's attraction is her youth," she added.

"A woman is good to look at when she is young," he returned quietly. "She is sometimes good to talk to when she is past her youth. In my opinion Mrs. Allerton will be always attractive. And she is still young."

"Now you are cross," Gerda exclaimed. "And I said to myself when you returned just now, he is sorry he was disagreeable; he has come back to be nice to me. And the staircase will be altered and everything will be right, and I shall like my house after all. And I scolded myself for being a goose and ever thinking that you wouldn't have everything just-so to

please this troublesome person. Didn't you come back to tell me it would be all right?"

Wootten drew a chair up beside her and sat down. The annoyance had cleared from his expression somewhat, but he still felt irritable and dissatisfied.

"Yes," he said. "I decided on reflection that I ought to give way to you in this, because it is a matter in which you have every right to be considered first. It is your home, as you say. I'll see about the alterations you suggest to-morrow."

"Fred, you are very good to me," she said in softened tones. "And I've been perfectly horrid. Let us call the house 'The Folly,'—shall we?"

"No," he answered quietly, and with more than a touch of firmness in his manner. "I don't like those provocative titles."

He looked along the stoep and over his shoulder at the modest home which had satisfied him for so many years. He wondered whether he would ever be as happy in the big house that was slowly yet surely rising on its foundations as he was here in the Cottage, which so exactly suited his taste.

"We can't give it this name, anyway," he said, the regret he felt betraying itself in his voice. "It would be a misfit."

"How you love it, this poking little place!" she said. "I don't believe you will bring yourself to part with it. Keep it—just as it is; then when we quarrel you can run away here and hide."

"We are not going to quarrel, Gerda," he said gently.

"But we have quarrelled already," she returned, and laughed at the distress in his face.

"That was my fault," he said quickly. "I was inconsiderate. I am sorry."

His generous admission called for some response from her; she felt it. Often she had the feeling in regard to him that something was required of her which she could not give. The reluctance which held her back from every generous impulse that prompted her to repay his kindness in ever so small a way was stronger than the impulse it overrode.

BOOK II: THE WOMAN

*"Mine was the woman to me, darkling I found her; . . .
Hearing her laugh in the gloom, greatly I loved her."*

RUDYARD KIPLING.

BOOK II: THE WOMAN

CHAPTER XI

THE return of George Allerton to South Africa was marked by the double event of the engagement of his sister-in-law and the development of measles in his household. The sickness was confined to his small daughters, and was not serious; but it upset in a measure the domestic affairs, and threw him more in his own company than he cared about.

The first intimation he had of the condition of things at the house was from the chauffeur, who met him at the station with the car. He had come overland from Cape Town, and rather expected to discover his wife on the platform when he got in. It surprised him more than it disappointed him to find that she was not there.

He got into the car and was driven up to the house. Mrs. Allerton came out on to the stoep to welcome him. He put his arm about her and drew her inside the house and kissed her.

"You haven't measles anyhow," he said. "You are looking splendid."

"That's gladness," she returned, with her two arms twined around his neck, and her face close to his. "I have been as excited as a schoolgirl these last few

days. It's good to have you back. I've missed you desperately."

"Rubbish!" he said. "You've enjoyed a rest from my bullying."

He drew her to him and kissed her again. It was good to be home, good to look into a woman's eyes and read a loving welcome in them—to feel his wife's soft cheek against his own, and the close pressure of her arms about him. He had not missed her particularly, but he was unmistakably glad to be with her again.

"Besides missing me desperately, what have you been up to?" he asked, releasing her. "Every letter you wrote was filled with your gay doings. I thought it was time to come out and look after things. And now I find the house in quarantine. How are the kids?"

"Oh, going on capitally! They've got it very slightly. You'll have to look in on them presently. They know you've come, and they are all eager expectation."

He nodded, and pulled her down beside him on to a sofa. She leaned against him, with her hand on his shoulder, her pleased eyes scrutinising him closely.

"You are looking well. Had a good time?"

"Nothing to complain about," he answered, and met her gaze, smiling lazily. "Tell me all your news. What has been doing in my absence? And how are old Fred and his wife getting along? You didn't say much about her in your letters; but I gathered from them that she is neither plain nor sensible. So much the better."

"You shall wait and judge for yourself," she replied. "Beryl is bewitched by her, so are most of the young

men. By the way, you don't know our personal news. Beryl and Jack are engaged."

"Yes! Well, one rather expected that to come off."

"It very nearly didn't come off," Mrs. Allerton rejoined. "She got nervous at last, and left off playing with him. Mrs. Fred bewitched him too, you see; and Beryl felt neglected. A little jealousy did her no harm. She keeps him in hand now all right. They are out riding together somewhere. I see nothing of her these days."

"Lovers are proverbially selfish," he said. "I don't imagine we proved any exception to that rule. When are they going to get married?"

"Not for a year at least. He couldn't afford to."

"Rotten nuisance, isn't it?—the financial barrier. Wootten ought to give him a rise. Surely matrimony has softened his heart."

"Does it ever do that?" she asked. "Fred is at present very much engrossed with his own affairs. They are building—a big place close to the entrance to the new road. You can see it from the balcony."

"Just what I said he'd have to do," Allerton remarked. "She is going to show him how to spend his money. By Jove! Some women know how to do it all right. I shall go along there on the first possible chance. I confess to feeling curious."

"Along where?—To see the new house, or the new wife?"

He looked amused.

"I'll begin with the wife," he said. "Other people's houses don't interest me."

Notwithstanding his avowed curiosity. Allerton did not make Mrs. Wootten's acquaintance for some days.

He saw Wootten in town on the morning after his return, and promised him that he would call round the same evening; and after dinner he set out with every intention of keeping his appointment. He had told his wife where he was going, and asked her to accompany him; but she was tired and preferred to remain at home. And so he started alone to walk the short distance to the Cottage. The night was perfect, warm and still and starlit. Overhead the sky was a dome of slaty blue, remote and cloudless, and strewn with stars like powdered gold-dust scattered over the floor of heaven. The earth gave forth at intervals a breath of hot air, which rose in languid waves and mingled its passionate warmth with the fresher breath of the young night, and in mingling lost its ardent heat and became tamed and fragrant and pleasing, redolent of the scent of pine and eucalyptus, and the sweeter scents of the night flowers. It suggested to Allerton walking over unseen fires which the crust of the world concealed.

There was that in the night which appealed strongly to his imagination. He was a man of intense and quick feeling, with a mind as sensitive as a photographic film to the influence of external conditions. Beauty as expressed in natural effects appealed to him in any form, whether beauty of life or beauty of inanimate things. Eye governed brain in this man, and feeling subordinated both.

For some unaccountable reason Allerton felt oddly reluctant when he turned into Park Lane to proceed further. He hesitated at the corner of the road and debated whether he should not go to the club instead. While he hesitated a familiar sound came to his ears on the quiet air, a sound which he had heard frequently

in the past and which decided him now to continue on his way: it was the sound of an organ, Wootten's organ, which he had listened to often from the same spot, when he had passed that way in the evenings. The music had companioned the man's lonely nights. Allerton appreciated his reason for playing to himself in the past; what he failed to understand was his need for doing so now.

The music ceased as he approached the house. When he was close to the gate he saw the back of Wootten's head and shoulders, as he had so often seen them when he passed while the man was playing. That back view of Wootten, seated before his instrument, had always struck him as peculiarly lonely; strangely, it struck him again in precisely the same way. The figure within the lighted room showed solitary and aloof.

The light from the room and the light from the hall shone brightly out upon the surrounding darkness. It revealed clearly the steps leading up to the stoep, and the short path to the gate; it revealed the gate, though less brilliantly; and, to any one seated on the darkened, creeper-screened stoep, it revealed also the man who stood outside the gate, with his reluctant hand upon it, hesitating in the act of pushing it wide.

Allerton's hesitation was inexplicable. He had come with the intention of making this visit; he was expected, and was sure of a welcome; yet something outside his volition, beyond his comprehension, held him back from entering. It was like an intangible presence in his pathway which, because of its intangibility, he could not set aside.

And then something happened that settled his doubt

finally. Out of the gloom a woman's unexpected laugh smote upon his ears. It was the sweetest, most seductive laugh he had ever heard, and it fell on the surrounding silence as a bird's song falls, or the music of the wind in the trees—a sound in perfect harmony with the peace it momentarily disturbed.

As he took his hand off the gate, and turned silently and swiftly and walked away from the house, Allerton was conscious of behaving in an amazing and most unusual way. Why, he wondered, and stopped at the corner of the street to light a cigar with a hand that was none too steady, should a woman's laugh move him so tremendously? It was a very ordinary thing—a woman's laugh. And yet he felt that this was no ordinary laugh, no ordinary woman from whom the sound came. The laugh had got hold of him somehow. It rang in his heart, in his brain; it haunted him. He turned the corner, and the laugh pursued him, provocative, spontaneous, inviting. It rang in his ears all the way. For that matter, it was in his ears, in his heart, in his brain, for many days to come—the music of an unseen woman's laugh sounding in the gloom.

Wootten left the organ seat and came to the window and stood in the lighted aperture, looking towards the road.

"George is late," he said. "I thought he would have been here by now."

"He has been and gone again," a voice answered him from the darkness of the stoep.

In his surprise Wootten stepped on to the stoep and approached his wife, who reclined in a big chair in the shadows, with her face, its unseen expression

faintly amused, faintly disappointed, turned towards the gate.

"Been!—and gone again!" he repeated. "I never saw him come up the path."

"He couldn't make up his mind to come inside," she answered. "He stood at the gate for a while: then he went away."

Wootten's bewilderment increased.

"Surely," he said, "you must be mistaken. Why should he stand outside, and not come in?"

Gerda suddenly smiled. She moved her position slightly, and leaned back with her hands clasped behind her head.

"That is what I should like to know . . . I think he was afraid."

"Afraid!" Wootten ejaculated incredulously. "Afraid of what?"

Gerda's smile deepened. Had Wootten been able to see her face clearly he would have detected the light of mocking satisfaction in her eyes. On the whole she was more amused than sorry that Allerton had elected to remain outside.

"Since everything else here is familiar to him, I suppose of me," she replied.

He thought she was jesting. He laughed and sat down beside her; and the woman, whose laugh had so disturbed George Allerton, lay still and silent in her chair, and wondered about the man whom she had seen standing in indecision outside the gate, and whom subsequently she had watched walk away and disappear in the darkness.

CHAPTER XII

ON leaving Park Lane Allerton went to the club and put in an hour there before returning home. Some explanation, he realised, would be demanded when he got back, and the club afforded a loophole of escape from a more faithful version of his defection. The atmosphere of the club proved beneficial also in relieving the strain of emotional tension to which he was strung.

When later he returned home he had his emotions sufficiently under control to enable him to carry matters off easily. To have gone back with a truthful description of the night's doings would have been impossible. The things was inexplicable—an obsession—madness. His heart had been gripped by the sound of a woman's laugh. It had caused him an intense physical feeling, almost as though the laughing lips had been laid in a caress upon his own. The sensation stayed with him, tormentingly; he could not shake it off. The sight of her probably would cure his madness, he told himself; it was occasioned by the sense of mystery which that provocative laughter, proceeding from unseen lips out of the surrounding gloom, had produced with so surprising an effect upon him. Possibly, if instead of turning back he had gone on and been introduced to her, the obsession which held him would have passed, and he would have discovered in

her the ordinary pretty woman with the ordinary woman's charm.

He entered his house by the drawing-room window. He saw his wife and sister-in-law inside the room as he came up the path, and he walked on to the stoep and stepped through the window and confronted them.

Beryl looked up at his appearance with a laughing question, and his wife, too, glanced towards him, displaying manifest interest in his reply.

"Are you a fresh victim?" Beryl demanded. "What do you think of Mrs. Fred? Isn't she just sweet? The Woottens are a new version of Beauty and the Beast."

"Fred is a dear," Mrs. Allerton interposed.

"So was the fabulous Beast," her sister retorted. "Come, George, confess! Has she bewitched you?"

"I'm afraid I am going to prove altogether disappointing," he answered, taking a seat near the window and meeting her questioning eyes smilingly. "I haven't been there."

"Not been there! I understood——"

"I know," he interrupted. "But I went to the club first, and when I left it seemed a bit late for calling upon people; so I came straight up."

Mrs. Allerton got up and crossed the room and leaned on the back of his chair.

"Won't Mr. Wootten think that odd—after you had promised him?"

He looked up, surprised.

"I don't think so—not when I explain. It isn't the same as in his batchelor days; informal hours didn't matter then. I'll go some other time."

"It's rather a pity you went to the club," she observed, her hand busy ruffling his hair. "It seems just a little unkind. I'd have gone with you if I had dreamed you would play truant."

"I believe he was afraid," Beryl said.

She had so nearly hit the truth that Allerton was conscious of feeling, if he did not show, embarrassment. He looked sharply in her direction. There was nothing intentional in the thrust, he knew; but it pricked none the less.

"Assuming the fear," he said lightly, "who should you say inspired it?—Beauty or the Beast?"

"Neither," she answered. "I think you were afraid of yourself."

"What a rotten opinion you must have of my strength of mind," he exclaimed. "I have feared a few things in my time, but never myself."

"I have a poor opinion of your strength of purpose," she returned. "What is one to conclude when a man sets out to do a thing and doesn't do it? You owed it to us. I've been aching with curiosity to hear what you think of Mrs. Fred. I'm sure of one thing, if Mr. Wootten hadn't been rich she would never have married him."

"Isn't that rather mean?" he asked quickly.

She laughed, not in the least annoyed.

"It's quite the reverse," she replied, "really. It's a tribute to her charm. Whenever I look at her I am struck afresh with Mr. Wootten's amazing cheek in proposing to her. He doesn't seem like that sort of man either. I wonder how he screwed himself up to the pitch."

"I don't like the tone of your conversation, Beryl,"

Mrs. Allerton observed. "People don't consider only material qualities when they marry."

Beryl refused to be crushed.

"Girls don't marry elderly men from disinterested motives," she insisted. "It's a one-sided love affair always."

"I wonder where you learnt so much about these matters," her brother-in-law said. "If that's the kind of wisdom you acquire on a farm it will be good for you when you live in the world and learn something of life."

Beryl laughed wickedly.

"I suppose you consider that getting the better of the argument?" she said. "I've been trying to explain life to you, but you insist—whether altogether sincerely, I can't say—in cherishing illusions. Illusions may be agreeable, but they are unsubstantial. Fred Wootten cherishes a few; his wife doesn't."

"I am beginning to credit you with that same fear with which you credited me just now," Allerton remarked. "You're afraid that Mrs. Fred may put your nose out of joint."

The girl met this thrust with a directness which surprised him. She advanced her left hand for his inspection.

"If it hadn't been for the wedding-ring on Mrs. Fred's finger you wouldn't be seeing this opal ring on my left hand."

"Unlucky stone, the opal," he said, teasing her. "You had better keep an eye on Jack."

"Don't you worry," she answered. "I'm doing that all right. Not that Jack would stand an earthly with Mrs. Fred. She prefers men of Mr. Trevor's type."

"Rotten taste," he returned.

"Oh, I don't know. He's good sport to flirt with."

"To *flirt* with!"

She looked impish.

"To flirt with," she repeated. "What else should a married woman want with any man?"

Allerton did a lot of private thinking during the next few days, thinking which did not tend to lessen the impression already made on him by the night's events. He was immensely perplexed by the affair. That anything so elusive should hang on to his imagination with such pertinacity annoyed him; it angered him because he could not throw it off. He had not spoken to the woman—he had not seen her; but he was on the way to falling in love with an idea. Put baldly thus, the thing sounded absurd. It was absurd. No sane person would indulge such fancies seriously. Yet he could not detach his mind from the subject; always his thoughts reverted to it, no matter how determinedly he tried to switch them off.

Out of the perplexities of this trying time an uncomfortable fact manifested itself clearly to him to his no small dismay. He found his home dull. It may have been due to his wife's unusual pre-occupation with the children and the little leisure she had to devote to him; he believed it was due in some measure to this circumstance; but he could not altogether disguise from himself the fact that her presence did not tend specially to enliven him. That it was largely his own fault he recognised. He felt flat. The restlessness of an acute mentality, hedged about and restricted by commonplace conditions, was producing its inevitable effect. The man was blindly groping for something which he

could not particularise, but which he needed insistentlly, something which he had missed in life, and only discovered that he had missed it with the recognition of his need.

The result of this mental state showed itself in continuous irritability, broken by intermittent demonstrations of unusual affection towards his wife. She displayed amazing tact under these trying conditions, and responded to his affectionate outbursts with a tenderness that touched him—touched him the more because he did not want her tenderness.

He was mercilessly frank with himself. He attempted no pretences to disguise the appalling truth that he was dissatisfied with everything—that he wanted to change things. And he did not know how to set about it.

It was a relief to have his sister-in-law in the house: her chaff and her brightness, even her quarrelsomeness—for she did not bear with his moods with the patience her sister displayed—were a source of satisfaction to him. He was able to work off some of the irritability on her with the comfortable assurance that he could not hurt her feelings and was by no means certain of always getting the best of a breeze.

It might be a phase, but it was not a new phase, which held him in grip. He had been alive to this growing dissatisfaction with existing things for some time. It was the consciousness of this discontent which had decided him upon the journey to England. The remedy for his restlessness was change, he believed. But the discontent lay within himself: he carried it with him and brought it back with him again. The trouble was temperamental, and the cure for it lay in

his own possession, a fact he had not discovered. Self-discipline, like the seven times immersion in Jordan, is a cure which is not practised with sufficient frequency, owing to the inability of the individual to recognise its value in application to his need.

CHAPTER XIII

IT has been said that man controls, he is not controlled by, his destiny. Few would wish to question this, nevertheless life moulds certain people in unexpected fashion; when it deals hardly with the individual it sometimes hammers him into a shape scarcely recognisable when compared with the more generous qualities of this untroubled nature. The monopoly of personal grief, the refusal to share it, the conscious act of repression in concealing it from the world, tend to harden the individual and to increase his natural reserve. We share joy more readily than we share sorrow; it is as though the heart were ashamed to grieve openly. Gerda had known more sorrow in her life than happiness. She had been fashioned for love and brightness. Nature had been generous to her physically. But her destiny had led her along sordid and sad paths, until unexpectedly it widened into the broad and sunless road of luxurious, loveless ease. She had followed her destiny unquestioningly. She had made no conscious effort to control it; it was beyond her control. Even in the matter of her marriage, circumstances left her no choice; there were others to consider besides herself: the only person concerned whose interest had not been considered was the man who offered her everything, and whose name she took.

It would have astonished Gerda had any one sug-

gested to her that her husband had not got the best of the bargain. He loved her, he had wanted her very urgently: he had what he wanted. She had desired freedom from financial worries—more for others than for herself. It was a fair exchange. On the whole, she considered he was to be congratulated. She strove to please him, and to make him happy as far as she could do without sacrificing any of her most earnest prejudices. Not to have succeeded in making him happy would have been to admit herself a failure as a wife, and her egoism shrank from the necessity to acknowledge failure in anything she undertook. Even when opposing him she made use of those qualities of charm and persuasion which, appealing irresistibly to him, quickly disarmed his resentment. Always she got her own way with him, sometimes against his better judgment; but she made her victory appear in the light of voluntary concession on his part, and so left him the agreeable sense of a generous indulgence to her pleasure rather than of defeated authority. She never undervalued the power of the weapon of her woman's wit; and he, kindly by nature, simple-souled, and rather dull, was not difficult to manage; he lent himself very readily to simple deceptions. He judged the world, as most people must judge it, from the standpoint of his own integrity. It is easy for a trustworthy nature to repose trust in others.

"I have everything," Gerda wrote to the mother, whom she loved, and whom she wished to convince of her happiness. "Fred is so kind. He thinks there is 'nobody like me. . . .'"

And her mother in England, who thought the same, and who read the brave words which had travelled so

many miles for her reassurance, smiled tenderly over the letter, with the unspoken prayer in her heart that her child would find happiness in the far-off country whither she had gone.

Gerda was not unhappy. Life was too full of novelty and surprises to leave room for regret. There were necessarily dull hours when she and her husband were alone together; but she contrived to fill the days too thoroughly to allow much time for solitude: that which he enjoyed most, a quiet home life, was hateful to her.

On the night that George Allerton had so singularly failed to keep his engagement, she had, while seated on the stoep listening to her husband playing in the little room behind her, been wondering with a feeling of resentful impatience how she would bear this sort of thing, which must inevitably become more frequent with the passing years—these long, slow evenings with a man whose companionship she did not want, and with whom she felt, despite their close relationship, always a little strange. This strangeness was in no sense the result of shyness; it was caused by an entire absence of sympathy.

The event of Allerton's expected visit excited in her no particular interest or curiosity. She supposed her husband's friend would be a man after his own pattern. She pictured him as middle-aged and solid and rather dull, the kind of man who would prefer to sit and smoke with her husband rather than talk to her. When he appeared at the gate and stood irresolute and motionless, with an undecided hand upon the latch, and the light from the hall striking on his strong, good-looking face, revealing to her intent, arrested

gaze his broad and fine proportions, her ideas underwent a rapid reconstruction.

She knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that the man in the road, who who hesitated to enter, who finally decided not to enter, and turned abruptly away, was George Allerton. She knew also that this man possessed a personality that would interest her. His very irresolution attracted her. She enjoyed his vacillation, so at variance with the purposeful strength of his face; it piqued her curiosity. It was this appreciation of his extraordinary reluctance that surprised from her the laugh which had so curiously affected him and decided him upon retreat. No act on his part, no conscious attempt to provoke her interest, could have aroused her curiosity as this unpremeditated flight from the sound of her mirth.

All that evening she thought of him, and during the following days. When finally they met it was with their mutual curiosity aggravated by the interval of speculation to quite an unusual degree. The meeting fell short of the interest created in advance; it left a sense of flatness in its wake.

Gerda had been calling on Mrs. Allerton to inquire for the children, who were convalescent, but were still in quarantine. She was returning when she met Allerton in the garden. He had just entered by the gate as she approached it, and he remained beside it, holding it open, until she came up to him. When she was quite close he deliberately shut the gate and stood with his back to it, regarding her with keen, compelling eyes, eyes which betrayed his interest and demanded a corresponding frankness from her. He knew who she was; he knew that she was equally

aware of his identity. He raised his hat, and his features relaxed into a smile that held a furtive friendliness in its quiet geniality, and a sort of question, as thought it implied, We have met already. You are not going to deny that, surely?

Gerda stood still in the path, her warm brown eyes, lit with laughter, raised to his. She wanted to ask him, Why did you run away the other night? She came near to doing it; but he forestalled her speech.

"It is Mrs. Wootten, I think?" he said, and added immediately, "In fact, I know it is. You must allow me to introduce myself. I am George Allerton."

"Yes," she said, and gave him her hand. "I have seen you before. On that occasion also you stood by the gate."

He laughed with a faintly embarrassed amusement.

"I didn't know you were there," he said, "until you laughed."

"Fred was disappointed," she said. "He expected you."

"I know. But he was occupied, and I had somewhere else to go. I meant to call afterwards, but it was too late. I'll come another evening. . . . May I?"

The question was asked in a tone of such persuasiveness that she could not fail to notice its intensely personal note. He was not looking at her when he spoke; he looked beyond her along the shaded path, patterned in delicate tracery by the overhanging pepper-trees. She scanned his face swiftly while his eyes were averted, and rapidly made up her mind about him. He was the most virile and interesting man whom she had ever met.

"Come soon," she said, and met the keen flash of his eyes with a faint smile.

"Thank you," he answered; "I will."

He had made an equally rapid summary in regard to her; and he believed that here lay a remedy for his discontent. She was alive to the finger-tips, impulsive, attractive, lovely as a dream—and safe. He deliberately deluded himself in imagining the safety, perhaps because he did not wish any hint of danger to suggest itself as a reason for advancing cautiously in the pursuit of an acquaintance which appealed to him so strongly. It was safe, on account of his marriage and because she was the wife of his friend.

He told himself this as he walked on towards the house, after separating from her, which he did a little abruptly—dwelling on these conventional barriers insistently, as though he strove to convince himself, against her better judgment, that playing with fire is not a dangerous practice under certain conditions. He attempted no deception as to the presence of fire; he had sufficient warning of that on the night when the provocative sound of her laughter had quickened the beating of his pulses, and echoed in his brain in the silence of the warm, sensuous night. He was in the mood to disregard these warnings, and he had absolute confidence in his powers of restraint. But he was overlooking the woman and the possibility of danger for her. He did not give that side of the question a thought.

When he entered the house Mrs. Allerton was in the hall. She faced round at the sound of his step, and cause towards him.

"I wish you had been home sooner," she said.

"Mrs. Wootten called. Surely you must have seen her?"

"Yes. We met at the gate." He hung his hat on a peg, and swung round on her suddenly and smiled. "I haven't quite got over the surprise. Fancy old Fred!" . . . Where on earth did he meet that girl?"

"Did she speak to you?"

"Oh, yes! I introduced myself. She isn't shy."

He smiled again at the recollection of the meeting. Maud Allerton smiled also.

"No. She is as pretty as a picture, isn't she?" she said.

"Yes; that's apt," he replied. "She might be a picture called to life. I can't fancy her as Fred's wife, anyhow."

"That is odd," Mrs. Allerton observed. "I felt exactly like that when I first saw her. Now I can't actually imagine her as the wife of another man."

"Naturally," he returned, "the law being as it is."

"Oh!" She laughed. "You know what I mean. I express myself badly. Fred is thoroughly suited to her. He makes the right setting. The finest jewels are set plainly, and a good picture looks best in an insignificant frame. That's what I mean. Married to any one else, the effect would be marred. He forms the plain setting of solid worth. Anything less would cheapen her."

"It is perhaps as well to look at it like that," he said, "since she is married to him. He's solid enough anyway."

"His devotion to her is beautiful," Maud Allerton said.

He put an arm round her neck with a careless laugh.

"Give him time to get over the honeymoon. It must be rather an agreeable lot, after all, to live always with an animated work of art. Imagine that face presiding over the eggs and bacon!"

"Men overrate beauty," she remarked.

"Oh, I don't know! It's rather nice to have around," he said.

CHAPTER XIV.

ONCE again Allerton set out for the Wootten's house, and on this occasion also when he arrived at the corner of the road he heard Wootten playing his organ, and he saw, on nearing the gate, the back view of his head and shoulders against the light.

He opened the gate, and closed it quietly behind him and walked on to the stoep. The solitary figure inside the lighted room continued to play, unconscious of his approach. In the old days when Allerton had visited the Cottage and surprised the man thus occupied and engrossed, he had taken a seat on the stoep and smoked and waited for a break in the music before announcing his presence: to-night he walked on to the stoep and stood for a moment or so looking towards the shadow beyond the lighted windows. In the gloom, standing with her back to the dense curtain of creepers, the dim outline of her face showing darnly, turned in his direction, was Gerda. She remained still and expectant, waiting for him to come to her. When he advanced swiftly to her side she held out her hand in greeting, and he observed how beautifully rounded was the arm to which it belonged, how perfect the line from wrist to shoulder. She was in every respect a very finished work of art. The shining gladness of her look assured him of his welcome,

ever without the softly uttered, impulsive speech, which gratified him exceedingly.

"I am so glad you came to-night. I was feeling so dull before you arrived."

"Why do you suffer yourself to be bored?" he asked. "He would stop playing if he guessed."

"But I don't want him to stop," she answered. "It amuses him. But that thing he is playing haunts me. I have been sitting here seeing visions. It made me restless, till I was forced to get out of my chair. Do you ever see visions? . . . Ghosts—of people you have loved? They come to me, and their eyes look into mine sadly and ask me mutely what I am doing here. I can't answer them. I don't know myself."

"I should think the answer was obvious," he replied. "You are making some one happy."

"She lifted her eyes to his—large, shining eyes, perplexed and questioning, and expressive of an extraordinary intimacy in view of the newness of the acquaintance. She shook her head.

"How can you tell? Some people never give happiness—never give anything; they only take. Queer thoughts come to me when I sit alone here, and he plays. If he didn't play quite so well it wouldn't affect me as it does. Now you are here, I am going to make use of you. Talk to me, and turn my thoughts into a lighter vein."

She seated herself in one of the cane chairs with which the stoep was furnished, and Allerton pulled a second chair close to hers and sat down.

"May I smoke?" he asked.

"Do. I'll join you, please."

He lighted a cigarette for her, holding his hand

under hers for hers to rest on while he held the match. She looked into his eyes and smiled. There was a suggestion of mischief in the smile.

"Fred hates to see me smoke," she said.

"Yes! Well, some people find a difficulty in ridding themselves of their prejudices," he said. "My wife holds similar views in regard to women smoking."

"You don't?"

"Oh lord, no! it's too general. And, upon my word, I can't see the harm in it. It takes some people longer than others to accustom themselves to change. There was a strong prejudice against mixed bathing at one time. It still holds among certain people; but that doesn't detract from the popularity of the practice. It's odd how the human mind runs in grooves."

"They are nice, safe things, grooves," she observed thoughtfully.

"For the timid mind, yes. I confess to preferring the sense of freedom one enjoys when one gets out of the groove. Some one has to get outside and widen out the track."

"Some one does, of course. But the rest resent it."

"Oh, the pioneer's job is usually thankless. But the adventurous spirit disregards that side of it. The race can't continue in Indian file. It is impossible to progress in leading-strings."

She looked at him with her large, inquiring eyes partially hidden beneath the downward-curving lashes, her chin tilted slightly, and the blue smoke curling upward between her lips, rising lazily into the warm night air.

"We all wear them," she said. "Very few people

ever rid themselves of them entirely. Our leading-strings are not only other people's opinions—we may disregard those; the strings which control us are other people's feelings. We can only discard these when we cease to love."

"You are getting very deeply into it now," he said. "I doubt whether the masculine mind takes quite so altruistic a view. There are occasions when it is unwise to exaggerate the importance of sentiment."

"I don't think we ever exaggerate that," she said; "but we often undervalue it. There are times when I feel very old—to-night I feel like that—when I seem to have lived a long time, and to have known a great deal. And out of that age-long experience one certainly only intrudes itself: the thing we live to regret, which remains a regret always, is our careless disregard of the feelings of those we love."

"These are your ghosts," he said—"the ghosts who have been gazing into your eyes to-night. I fancy this road must be haunted. The last time I came here I met a ghost. Shall I tell you about it?"

"Please."

She laughed softly, and at the sound he brought his head round deliberately and looked at her long and steadily.

"I think I ought to have paid greater attention to my ghost," he said. "They resent being set aside. And this one was very importunate. It stood in my path——"

"That is why you hesitated so long at the gate," she interrupted, and flashed a roguish smile at him. "Tell me what it looked like, your ghost."

He paused for a moment, and deliberated, with his

eyes on her face. Something in the expression of her face, in the quick challenge of her smile, moved him to gratify her curiosity, to test her quality with further audacity.

"You might not like it if I described my ghost accurately. It was a feminine ghost," he replied, after the brief pause, which the sound of the organ effectively filled. "It stood in front of me, and laid two shapely hands on my shoulders and pressed me backward. It never relaxed its effort for a moment. I couldn't pass it. There it was in my path—an intangible presence—a compelling force. I had no choice. And when it realised its power, it laughed. You've no idea how that laugh affected me—the quite satisfaction it expressed! All down the road it pursued me—that laugh in the gloom. The trees echoed it in their rustling leaves. It got into my brain. Now I am always listening for it. I want to hear it again."

"You won't," she said.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because you have broken the spell. She will never confront you again, that ghost. Others may come, but never that particular ghost."

"You appear to be well up in the subject," he observed. "My knowledge of their ways is confined to the instance I've told you of. I'm inclined to believe you're akin to the spirit world. You've happened out of nowhere. It wouldn't surprise me if you disappeared again. You don't somehow belong here."

"That's not flattering," Gerda said. "I hoped I fitted my surrounding always."

"It's the surroundings which don't fit you," he said. "There isn't space enough."

"I'm not so very big," she said, and laughed.

He leaned towards her suddenly.

"You are thistledown," he said quickly, "just like that. Your place is in the open—in the big, broad spaces. It is so I see you."

"The thistledown is blown about by every wind," she protested. "It is light and purposeless. It is scattered by a breeze, and beaten to the ground when the rain comes—and spoilt."

"No," he contradicted. "It is light, but never purposeless. It is when it is beaten to the ground that it fulfils its promise. The sodden earth does not spoil it; it springs up anew."

"And the beast with long ears devours it." She looked towards him with eyes that smiled mockingly, and threw her cigarette from her out into the darkness beyond the stoep. "Let us talk of something else," she said abruptly. "I am tired of myself." She held up a warning finger. "Listen!—the organ has ceased. Fred will be so surprised to find you here!"

"Oh, I think not! He is used to my turning up on his stoep like this."

"You've been great friends?" she said, with the manner of one asking a question rather than stating a fact.

For some reason the speech vexed him. He acquiesced, but without enthusiasm.

"We're friendly," he replied. "We don't see a great deal of one another."

Wootten came on to the stoep at the moment, and, seeing some one with his wife, but not recognizing who it was in the obscurity of the unlit stoep, frowned with quick annoyance. He had an idea that the figure reclining in the big chair beside his wife belonged to the

man whom he disliked, and whom Gerda still encouraged to visit her despite his reiterated objections. When Allerton turned his head and spoke, and he saw that it was not Trevor, his face cleared instantly. He joined them and seated himself with an air of agreeable relief.

"I didn't hear you come," he said.

"You never hear any one when you are turning that hurdy-gurdy," Allerton replied. "To-night I have enjoyed the concert under very pleasantly exceptional circumstances. What was the thing you were playing just now?—the thing with the haunting refrain?"

"I was improvising," Wootten answered.

"Your inspiration rises from a melancholy source," Gerda said. "I was near to tears when Mr. Allerton's opportune arrival successfully shut off the floodgates. I have named that piece 'Ghosts.'"

"You should switch on the light," her husband remarked, "and you wouldn't feel like that." He addressed himself to Allerton. "Gerda loves darkness. She always retreats to this dim corner when I play."

"In defiance of the tarantulas," she laughed. "They dart out and peer at me with their wicked, bright eyes, and dart back again and hide among the creepers. I come here because there is no garden. When we are in the new house I shall listen to his melancholy old music from the garden. He'll play to me while I dream in the moonlight."

"And when there is no moon?"

"There will be the warm, deep dusk," she said; "and that is better still. You haven't seen the plans of the new house? Fred, haven't you them handy?"

Wootten went inside and fetched them. When he

came back he turned the switch, and the stoep was instantly flooded with light. Gerda emitted a soft sound that was like a sigh of regret; and Allerton, now that he had the opportunity of seeing her face clearly, took a long look at her during the time that Wootten was occupied in bringing forward a small table and laying his plans open upon it. He had considered her lovely seen in the daylight, seen thus, with the bright artificial light falling on her hair and on the upturned, smiling face, her slender throat revealed by the low-cut dinner dress of soft rose veiled in grey, he found her almost disturbingly beautiful. The dark splendour of her eyes, with their suggestion of mystery, of provocative, conscious power, held him fascinated. He was looking very earnestly and deeply into her eyes, unaware of the prolonged intensity of his gaze, when Wootten's voice, speaking at his elbow, startled him and brought him back to actualities.

"This is the ground plan," Wootten was saying. "We'll look first at this. You'll have to move your chair a little for the light."

Allerton made the necessary move reluctantly. He could not, without turning his head, see the woman any longer; but he heard the soft rustle of her movement as she sat straighter in her chair and leaned forward to view the plans over his shoulder.

"The whole thing is really Gerda's design," Wootten said. "Building is her absorbing hobby for the moment. This is the general idea for the house—at present." He smiled whimsically at his wife. "It is liable to alteration until the final brick is in."

"It's a mansion," Allerton said.

Gerda laughed softly.

"I fancy that is what Fred fears. He thinks it pretentious."

"I think we should be more comfortable in a smaller place," Wootten admitted. "But Gerda likes room to move in."

"He would prefer to stay on here," the soft voice at Allerton's shoulder remarked.

"Oh, this!" Allerton's tone disposed of the Cottage summarily. "You couldn't do that. I don't see anything amiss with these plans. You'll have a fine place—why not? And the situation is good. I drove with the wife past there this morning, and envied you your pitch. I saw they were getting ahead with the grounds, and planting trees extensively. In a few years the place ought to look very nice."

"Years!" Gerda exclaimed. She sat back, her eyes darkening with a look of disappointment. "That's the worst," she said, "of building—anything. The waiting! . . . I'm afraid of waiting. I want things now. The things which we wait for never come."

"Some of them do," Allerton said.

Wootten laughed confidently.

"Some things are worth waiting for, and are better appreciated for the delay," he asserted.

She looked at him with faintly knitted brows. He didn't understand her. She had a feeling that he would not understand even if she attempted to explain.

CHAPTER XV.

ALLERTON had a very clear intimation that night that anything like friendship between himself and Mrs. Wootten was impossible: it would be too dangerous. She bewitched him. There was no other word for it. He determined, as he walked homeward after two bewildering hours spent in her society, to avoid her as far as he could do so without exciting comment. Nothing satisfactory could result from further intercourse. She interested him too deeply.

He was amazed and immeasurably perplexed by the absorbing nature of the interest she inspired in him. He could not detach his thoughts from her. Never before had any one gripped him in the same way. He was not the type of man who succumbs easily to feminine attraction; but there was about this woman, besides her disturbing beauty, the elusive quality so difficult to define which one can only summarise as charm—charm of sex—of beauty—of physical perfection, and of mental qualities quite above the usual. She was a woman made for love—the type of woman who breaks men's hearts, who sometimes breaks her own.

Masculine homage was to Gerda an excitement; it lightened the dulness of life. She did not take it seriously. If ever she looked into her own heart and questioned the worthiness of playing with the

deeper feelings, that side of her nature which sorrow had warped turned these more serious reflections aside. Love for her was dead. She had no doubts about herself at all. It was good to laugh and to forget.

"You like George Allerton?" her husband said to her, when Allerton had departed, and they stood together on the stoep, listening to the sound of his footsteps dying away in the distance.

She did not immediately reply. She remained for a second or so gazing into the heavy darkness with a far-away, reflective expression in her eyes. Then, when he had ceased to expect an answer, she turned to go inside and said slowly:

"He seems quite nice—a little out of the ordinary. But it is rather soon to be sure that I'm going to like him."

"I hope you will like him," he said, and put his hand on her arm in the shy, rather diffident way he had with her, as though never quite confident that his caresses were welcome. "I thought you got on very well together."

Gerda laughed.

"I made an effort to be nice to him because he is your friend," she said, and was ashamed of the insincerity of her words when she felt the grateful pressure of his hand upon her arm, and listened to his quietly uttered thanks.

He was so simply trusting, this big-hearted husband of hers. There were times when she wished that she possessed a less fine nature than was his. If she could have discovered some small meanness in him to despise she believed that it would be easier to live with him in

the unequal conditions upon which their relationship rested. Instead her respect for him increased daily, but love did not grow out of it.

With the absence of love her married life became increasingly irksome to Gerda. It was a life of self-repression, of insincere kindnesses and small irritations. There were times when she shrank from her husband's touch. And yet she liked him—rather as a grown woman likes a shy child, whom she doesn't quite understand, and whose companionship irks her into being somewhat neglectful. Her sense of responsibility towards him, and a consciousness of falling short in little things—things which, though small, were of tremendous human importance—worried her. She hated hurting him, but was unable to avoid doing so. Instinct told her when he was hurt. It distressed her enormously; but the thing was beyond cure. She had blundered in marrying him. The blunder was irremediable. She had to make the best of it. And that was exactly what she was incapable of: her temperament was opposed to submission. The sense of irrevocableness chafed her beyond endurance.

And amid the inadequacies and distresses of this uncongenial life the dominating personality of George Allerton obtruded unexpectedly, and by his quick interest in her and his subsequent avoidance of her, he attracted her attention to himself, and speedily became a prominent figure in her thoughts. Nothing was more calculated to stimulate her interest than his sudden and unaccountable avoidance.

In his sustained evasion there was more of discretion than inclination. Gerda intuitively realised this. She sought, from love of excitement, to overcome this

discretion. She wanted to be friendly—intimately friendly—with him. She had a persuasion that he would make a good chum; and she would not admit any reason why she should not chum up with him openly. Yet, on the few occasions when they met, there was between them a sort of furtive embarrassment that should have warned her of the inadvisability of pursuing an impossible dream of platonic affection. She was not one of the few women who can enjoy platonic intercourse. She was altogether too feminine and too daring.

Matters were complicated by Mrs. Allerton's liking for Mrs. Wootten and her determination to show particular friendliness towards Fred Wootten's wife. Unwittingly she defeated her husband's purpose by inviting Gerda to the house on every possible occasion; and, because Wootten did not dance, and hated attending parties, Gerda fell readily into the habit of going to dances with the Allerton's party—of going about with them to any public function. Beryl professed a warm-hearted enthusiasm for the beautiful young married woman, and spent her time between the two houses. And Wootten, glad for his wife to enjoy herself, and happy in the knowledge that she was with these good friends of his, encouraged the intimacy, even though it robbed him of much of her society. His lonely evenings became more frequent. They were not, of course, compulsory; he might have accompanied his wife; but since he did not enjoy going out, and, beyond escorting her to and from an entertainment, saw nothing of her in the interval, he preferred the dull, but less boring alternative of waiting at home until she returned, bright, animated, tireless—a radiant vision in her eve-

ning dress amid the homely surroundings of the little room.

At first the housekeeper insisted on waiting up also, and would come into the room, sleepy-eyed and weary and admiring, with a cup of chocolate steaming in her hand. Mrs. Martin had fallen under Gerda's spell, and was one of her warmest admirers. Gerda would take the cup from her and set it down and put her two hands on the angular shoulders and shake their owner in gentle reproof.

"You mustn't do it," she said once. "You're not to do it. You old dear, you ought to have been asleep hours ago. If I find you up the next time I come home late I shall put you to bed myself."

She had stooped forward impulsively and kissed the lined, tired face, which had not known kisses from fresh young lips for many a year, and sent the housekeeper to bed in a flutter of happy embarrassment. Then she turned to her husband, when they were alone, with a tender little smile playing over her face and a look of remembrance in her eyes.

"She makes me think of Mother," she said. "Do you remember how tired she often looked?" She sat down on the arm of his chair and laid one shapely arm lightly about his shoulders. "How Mother loved you! You were always very good to her, Fred."

"It is not difficult to be good to some people, Gerda," he answered. "I count it a privilege to know her."

She played inconsequently on his coat with her fingers, and was silent a while and thoughtful. Presently she looked towards him again and laughed brightly.

"You little dreamed what you were undertaking.

See how I revolutionise your household! The selfishness of it! You ought to be in bed as well as Mrs. Martin. You look tired."

"We are neither of us young, you see," he replied. She flushed quickly.

"I wish you wouldn't say those things. You aren't old. Why do you wait up for me? I'd creep in ever so quietly if I knew you were in bed."

Wootten laughed pleasantly.

"You would make me out more senile than I make myself out to be," he said. "I wait up, I suppose, because I like to. I wouldn't miss this quiet time together for any number of hours which might be passed in sleeping. You've had your pleasure; I am getting mine now. . . . I like you in that dress, Gerda. You look very beautiful to-night."

He gazed up at her, perched on the arm of his chair like some exquisite picture stepped out from its frame, poised there by accident, and liable to vanish again in a moment without warning; and his eyes glowed deeply with passionate admiration. She was so dear to him, this lovely thing of warm, soft flesh, and rich and wondrous colouring, and beautiful raiment, which he had provided her with; this woman of varied moods, of kindly impulsiveness, of curious unresponsiveness, and fits of uncertain temper, when nothing which he said or did was right. Whatever her mood—whether kind or careless or cold—she was always very dear. She gazed back at him now with one of her swift, charming smiles, and answered slowly:

"Beautiful to-night! . . . because I'm happy. . . ." She placed a hand softly over his eyes. "Don't look at me any longer or you'll see defects. I like you to

think me beautiful. I'm not really. What is beauty? Something which delights only the senses? Men think so, but it isn't true. I've seen beauty to-night—in a grey, tired face, when that ridiculous cup of chocolate, which I don't want but will have to drink, was brought in; I'm seeing it now—in this other tired face which so valiantly strives to hide its fatigue. . . . Ah! my dear, I understand beauty better than you do. I see it often in those about me; but when I gaze into my mirror for it—it isn't there. Don't contradict me. I know better than you do. Beauty is no evanescent quality. We miscall things. In a few years the colour will be gone from my hair, the firmness from my flesh; my face will fall into little hollows and lines—all the history of my life will be written in them. Beauty doesn't fade like that—in a few years. Beauty—real beauty—attracts always. It is love and unselfish service."

"I know," he returned quietly. "You do not believe that it is only your face I admire, surely? You don't suppose that it is because you are good to look at that so many people love you? You are too wise to imagine that you conquer hearts with your eyes. A woman may be lovely, but it is herself who is lovable or the reverse."

"You make me feel as though I were in church," she said. "There is the dear old organ behind me, and you saying fine, impossible things which make me want to be all you attempt to show that I am. I am selfish, Fred. I may be moved sometimes by nice impulses, but down in the bottom of my heart I'm cold and hard and selfish. I try to hide it because I am vain; but it peeps out when I'm off my guard. You've seen it.

You shut your eyes to it, but you know it's there. 'What is it that you want?' . . . Well, I ask myself can make a goliath brain out of a little one, asks?— 'What is it that you want?' . . . Well, I ask myself that, and the answer always is, 'To be happy.' So I concentrate all my efforts upon that one thing."

"There is nothing unworthy in that," Wootten said. "Why shouldn't you be happy?"

"Because it is impossible for any one to be absolutely happy without sacrificing some one to his need. That is life. I think happiness more often comes to the people who don't strive after it."

She broke off abruptly, and got up from the chair-arm and took up her chocolate and began to drink it.

"Fancy growing gloomy at two o'clock in the morning!" she cried. "We'll have bad dreams if we don't cheer up." She approached him with the cup in her hand. "Please help me with this. It has got to be finished, anyhow."

Wootten hated chocolate, but he got up, took the cup from her, and swallowed the contents.

"You are just a dear child, Gerda," he said, and put the cup down and suggested going to bed.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE passing of the months wrought several changes—subtle, imperceptible changes many of these were, noticeable only to the persons intimately concerned, changes that were shaping to the alteration of several lives.

Among the more apparent of these was the rapid progress of Wootten's new house, which Gerda was satisfied to allow to proceed unhindered by further alterations. Her constructive interest had considerably abated. She seemed only anxious that the house should be finished quickly to permit of their moving in. She was already considering a ball on an elaborate scale as a house-warming. The music-room had been planned to answer the double requirement of concert-room and ball-room. She proposed to entertain extensively; and Wootten, realising that she would not settle down to a quiet home life, raised no objections. His wife's ideas of enjoyment were opposed to his, and his had to give way. So long as the entertaining was in his own house, he reflected comfortably, there would be always some quiet corner into which he could retreat.

Gerda had become very popular in Port Elizabeth, with her own sex as well as with the men. She was too great a general favourite to excite jealousy. While many men paid her marked attention, she showed no clear preference for any one, and so avoided invidious

talk. The last thing which any one suspected was the danger of the unacknowledged attraction between herself and George Allerton.

Maud Allerton was surprisingly blind to the rapid development of her husband's infatuation for the woman whose society he never appeared to cultivate. Although Gerda was so frequently with them, she and Allerton were seldom alone together. He did not trust himself to see her often, save in the presence of others. He was in love with her—he admitted it to himself—passionately in love. It was the first time in his life that he had known the quality of passionate love; and he found it a most disturbing and absorbing experience. It was like a sharp hunger which gnawed into his very soul.

There were moments when he despaired of getting the better of this passion, moments when he dreaded what the result of it would be, what it would lead to. He wanted to do the right thing, to play the game; and he was fearful of the terrific strain upon his honour. Here was he, a man with responsibilities, a man with a good wife, whom in a quiet, undemonstrative way he loved, with children to whom he owed a sacred duty, and a friend who trusted him, in love with that friend's wife, and tempted a thousand times to declare the fact. To entertain the thought even for a second was abominable. It was unthinkable that he should abuse the confidence of his friend, the trust of his wife. Yet the madness worked in his veins like an insidious poison, and gave him no peace. He had always entertained contempt for those men who allowed their passions to get the upper hand with them; now he knew that he had judged through ignorance.

It is impossible, until one has felt the sharp hunger of temptation, to estimate its power in undermining the more worthy principles of human nature. The individual should not constitute himself a judge in human affairs until he has resisted a like temptation to that which he condemns.

Matters came to a head between Allerton and Gerda unexpectedly, and with an abruptness which caught them unprepared and entirely off their guard. It was so slight a thing to precipitate matters that, looking back on that evening later in the blank realisation of what had transpired, Allerton was at a loss to understand the recklessness which had swept him off his feet in a moment and reduced his fine scruples of honour to mere high-sounding, meaningless phrases. He had meant to fight his growing passion until he had it in subjection. The thing could be done; men had done it before. There is nothing which the human will is not capable of if the will to do be strong enough. He was averse from self-indulgence in any form. To make love to this woman, who was, as his intuition told him unfailingly, in love with him even as he was with her, would be contemptible in every sense of the word. He did not wish to disturb her peace. So long as he was silent there was no harm done.

And then he forgot his resolution, forgot everything, and broke the silence he had so arduously maintained.

The swift breaking down of the barriers which he had set up between them startled Gerda, even frightened her. She had not foreseen this. The loss of control in a man she had believed to be particularly strong dismayed her. With the barriers down, the decent pre-

tences revealed for what they were in the stark light of truth, she saw herself exposed to the full danger of a situation she had never dared to face even in her thoughts. For the first time in her life she knew fear.

And the whole disastrous thing had come about through the sign of weeping which her face had betrayed to his keen, jealous gaze.

He had called at the Cottage to see Wootten, who was not at home when he arrived. The coloured servant had admitted him; and Gerda came to him to explain her husband's absence, came to him with the mark of recent tears upon her face, and signs of unmistakable depression in her bearing. He had never seen her other than gay and smiling; the sight of her so unlike her usual self, dispirited and dull, roused in him a feeling of sharp resentment against Wootten, whom he held responsible for these signs of distress, and whom he deemed lacking in sympathetic understanding.

The fire of his smouldering passion blazed suddenly into flame, consuming in its fierce heat every scruple which he had ever possessed. So strongly moved was he that he did not heed, scarcely heard, what she said in explanation of Wootten's absence: he only realised that she was in trouble; that he loved her, and wanted to comfort her. He made some answer, what it was he did not know; but he saw her look at him wonderingly, as a person looks at some one who is behaving in an unusual way. That broke down his reserve finally. He approached her, and standing immediately in front of her, placed his two hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes—looked long and steadily, with a

tenderness, a glowing ardour, in his own before which hers fell.

"You have been crying," he said.

The deep tenderness of his voice as well as of his look, the firm grip of his hands upon her shoulders, unnerved Gerda. She tried to break away from him, but before she succeeded in this the tears welled anew in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. He took her in his arms swiftly and bent and kissed her lips.

"Oh, don't!" she cried. "Oh, don't!"

She struggled to get free. He released her then, and she sank into a chair and hastily dried her tears. She was frightened and dismayed beyond words. Al-lerton followed her, and stood leaning with his arms on the back of the chair.

"I didn't mean to do it, Gerda; but—I can't bear to see you cry," he said. He touched her hair caressingly. "My dear, it's been an open secret from the first, I think, my love for you. It's a secret still—yours and mine. There is no use in locking the door when we've looked behind it; but we can keep it closed from other eyes. It's our own secret—ours to guard from the world. Are you very angry with me?"

"Not angry," she answered. She rolled her handkerchief into a little ball and held it tightly between her hands. "You startled me. I'm sorry—oh, so very sorry! Why did you speak?"

"I couldn't help myself," he replied.

She twisted suddenly in her chair and looked up at him with wide, reproach-filled eyes.

"Don't you realise what you've done? This finishes—everything. How can we meet in future with this between us? I don't know what I shall do."

The hand on her hair slipped to her shoulders and held her; his face came down to a level with her own.

"I'll go away—round to Cape Town for a fortnight—a month, if you prefer it. When I return we will be able to meet in the ordinary way."

"I don't think I could," she cried.

"Oh yes, you will! It will come easier after a while. It isn't altogether my fault," he added. "I can't help loving you, Gerda."

"No," she returned. She caught at the arm of her chair and gripped it nervously. "We can't help loving. It's the one emotion in life we can't control. I know——"

"Gerda," he said, still holding her and forcing her to look at him, "you love me?"

"You shouldn't ask me that," she wailed. "It isn't fair. Don't ask me that."

There was no need to ask her; the answer was written in every line of her face, revealed in every inflection of her voice. He knew without any verbal assurance.

And then remorse gripped him. He removed his arm from about her neck and straightened himself and walked away to the window.

"God! What a muddle I've made of things!" he groaned.

The sight of him so greatly moved seemed to restore Gerda's composure. She faced him with more calmness than she had yet displayed, and said quietly:

"Wouldn't it be wiser not to think of it any more? If you make a trouble of this things will go hardly with you. We'll laugh—and forget."

"I would as readily laugh at a corpse," he returned bitterly. "If you can treat this lightly you don't know what love is."

His speech stung her into saying more than she intended. In the swift rush of emotion which his words called forth she laid bare her inmost heart to him as she had never done to another human being. Secrets, locked away in her breast so long that they shrank now from exposure, were drawn forward shamelessly in a moment of painful stress, and he read in them the story of her marriage, the reason for which he had been at a loss to understand.

"Love!" she echoed, and her voice fell in anguished tones on the silence of the room. "You think you know more about love than I do. . . . Ah, no! that can't be true. I loved—when I was eighteen—a boy. If he had lived we should have married, and this other love which has come to me now would never have been. But he was killed in the war; and I thought that for me all love had ceased. My heart seemed to die with him. That sorrow made me hard—hard and bitter. We were very poor. My mother let rooms after my father's death. She had two small sons to educate. Mr. Wootten lodged with her when he was in England. The second time he came I was at home. He was very good to my mother; and I loved her dearly. When I married him she had not to let rooms any more. I never loved him. He did not raise that question; and I believed that for me love was finished. I didn't know that I could love again like this. . . . I didn't understand."

She broke off suddenly, and, rising to her feet, confronted him with a soft appeal in her look.

"Leave me to do my duty by him. It's the least I can do. He's been very good to me."

He went to her and took her hand and held it for a moment or so.

"My dear," he said, "I've been a brute. I didn't know. I should have kept silence. We've both our duty to another to consider."

"Yes," she said softly.

"I love you so," he muttered. "I don't know quite how I am going through with it. Life's very crooked, dear."

"I know," she said. "But we've got to keep to the track—or be bad people."

"Or be bad people," he echoed, and dropped her hand abruptly and went quickly away through the window.

CHAPTER XVII

ALLERTON got home to find Densham in the drawing room with Beryl. The young man was dining with them, making the most of the few days that were left before his fiancée returned to Craddock, which she proposed to do at the end of the week. He was rather glad to find him there. In the heaviness of his mood the presence of some one outside the family was very acceptable; it drew the attention of the others away from himself, and rendered his abstraction less noticeable.

He made an effort during dinner to sustain his share in the light-hearted talk that flowed with such easy, careless merriment throughout the meal. An onlooker would have considered it an ideal picture of happy domestic life. There was no outward sign of the tragedy that loomed like a dark cloud in an otherwise stainless sky. It hung there unperceived by any, save by the man at the head of the table, who sat making a pretence at eating, and drinking more than was customary with him, desirous only of the meal ending, and with it the necessity to keep up an appearance of sociability. In the drawing-room after dinner the children monopolised the general attention during the half-hour which it was their privilege to consider peculiarly their own. They made a great deal of noise. He sat somewhat apart, unheeded by the rest, and observed them, think-

ing them over, considering his responsible position in regard to them. They took very little notice of him. He was a negligible quantity in their young existences. They were fond of him in an undemonstrative way, but he was not indispensable to their scheme of happiness, and he knew it, knew also that his own lack of interest was responsible for their indifference. He had not been created for the parental rôle. Densham was a great favourite with them. They had, with the announcement of the engagement, admitted him into the family, and dispensing with ceremonial, called him Uncle Jack promptly. He watched the young man romping with them. He could not understand his apparent enjoyment. It always bored him when they wanted him to join in their play.

From the children, shrieking with delight over Uncle Jack's sleight-of-hand performances, he turned his attention to his wife. She sat watching the happy little party with smiling interest, while Beryl played dance music in cheerful accompaniment to the noise. They didn't seem to want him. They were all very happy and absorbed and satisfied with things.

Maud Allerton looked up and caught his concentrated gaze, and her smiling satisfaction altered perceptibly. He saw the smile fade, and a look of perplexed inquiry grow in her eyes. She got up suddenly and approached him. It was the last thing he wished her to do. He was vexed at having drawn her attention to himself. He wanted to be left alone to his reflections: there were quite a lot of things he had to think out. His mind required sorting and arranging. But she broke into his train of thought and disturbed it. He was amazed at himself for resenting her interruption

as he did resent it. He looked surly when she halted in front of him.

"You are gloomy, old man," she said. "You don't like all this noise?"

"Oh, I don't mind it," he answered shortly.

"Come into the garden with me," she said, throwing out the suggestion in the tone of one pleasantly confident that it would be acceptable to him. He had mooned with her gladly in the past; that he might not want her society now did not occur to her.

Beryl struck a few chords, and started mischievously to sing, "Come into the garden, Maud. The wild night bat hath flown . . ."

He hesitated and got up with considerable reluctance. His sister-in-law swung round on the music-stool, and laughed.

"Poor old George!" she said. "Won't you be thankful when the end of the week comes, and you see my kit-bag in the luggage van?"

He turned his head and looked down at her with a thoughtful knitting of his brows. Her speech gave him a cue which he took immediate advantage of. He felt distinctly pleased with her for affording him an opportunity for saying something he wanted to say and had not known how to broach. The gloom of his expression relaxed.

"On the contrary," he replied. "I was going to propose that, since your visit had overrun the ordinary length to which hospitality extends to in-laws, you had better defer your departure for another few weeks. I have to go to Cape Town on business; and it's up to you to stay and keep Maud company."

Mrs. Allerton showed her astonishment. In her sur-

prise she forgot to feel hurt that he made no offer to take her with him; she awoke to that later. But she never allowed him to guess how great was her disappointment. She concealed her feelings from him more jealously than she had been wont to do.

"I'll do that gladly," Beryl said, looking pleased.

Jack Densham kissed the girl delightedly.

"Good biz!" he cried. "That lengthens out the rope considerably. Don't you hurry back on our account," he added, turning to Allerton. "We'll get along. I'll look after Mrs. Allerton."

She smiled in sympathy with his gladness, and tucked her hand within her husband's arm and drew him towards the window.

"Is the business worrying?" she asked.

"No," he answered untruthfully. "It's a bore, that's all."

He felt extraordinarily relieved and immensely ashamed of himself. It was the first real deception he had practiced in respect to her, but he consoled himself with the reflection that he was acting for the best. In a measure he was doing it for her. It was a step anyhow in the right direction. For the rest, it would remain for the future to determine the development of events. If he could he would keep to the track. He wanted to keep to the track: the other course spelt ruin for all concerned.

It was a hateful position to be placed in, love and duty warring with one another—love the stronger, but duty the more enduring, if it succeeded in wearing down the more forceful quality. It was a matter calling for the exercise of control; and control is apt to elude a man obsessed with the madness of passion.

There was no doubt about the obsession; it tormented like unsatisfied hunger, and gave him no peace.

He tried to imagine life as it might have been had he and Gerda met earlier, before either had formed other ties. She would have been his; he had no doubt on that head. Wherever they had met they were bound to love. And then jealousy awoke in him—jealousy of the dead boy whom she had confessed to loving. He had felt no resentment at the time of her telling him; now the thing angered him and confused his ideas of her. It was absurd to suppose that she could have loved the boy as she would have loved him had nothing intervened between them. But the knowledge that she had loved before stung him badly. He begrudged the boy every tender thought she had ever given him, every sorrowing thought she gave still to his memory. He was jealous even of her tears. Oddly, although the thing had happened years before they met, he felt that it was disloyal of her to have given her love elsewhere.

In his preoccupation he was forgetful of his own disloyalty, as he walked in the dusk, revolving these things in his mind, while the quiet figure of his wife kept pace beside him, silent, like himself, and, like him also, very deeply engrossed with her own thoughts.

He came out of his abstraction abruptly at the sound of her voice speaking unexpectedly after a prolonged pause, saying things which left him immeasurably perplexed and disconcerted and at a loss for words. It seemed that, while she remained blind to the cause of their estrangement, she was fully alive to its actuality. He had not suspected that, and it worried him.

"You are shutting me a good deal out of your life

lately, old man," she said. "I am afraid we are growing a little apart."

There was in her quiet voice, although she strove to make it sound matter-of-fact, a note of real distress; her face, too, worked painfully; but the darkness concealed these signs of emotion. He looked towards her sharply, flushing awkwardly, and answered in a jerky, embarrassed tone:

"Don't you think you are a little fanciful, Maud? I'm not aware of shutting you out of anything."

"Perhaps it's just my fancy," she allowed. She drew a little closer to him. "We've always been such chums, you and I. I'm apt to feel out in the cold when you don't talk things over with me. You are more reserved than you used to be. And you don't seem to need me so much. My need of you hasn't diminished; and so, you see, it hurts."

"Rot!" he ejaculated irritably.

She squeezed his arm affectionately.

"What a bore I am! Never mind. I won't worry you any more. How long do you expect to be in Cape Town?"

"Quite possibly a month," he said.

"So long as that! What a nuisance! In that case, Beryl had better stop on for the Wottens' dance. She was coming down for it."

"Oh, let her stay as long as she likes," he said, resolved to remain in Cape Town until the much-talked-of dance was over. In any case he did not propose to attend it.

"I thought perhaps you found her a little in the way," she said tentatively.

"Good lord! no," he answered, surprised. "She's all

right. I like her around. Your imagination is developing alarmingly. I must be growing crusty to give you these impressions."

"It isn't that," she said. "But I know you like your home to yourself; and Beryl spends a good deal of her time with us. But—if you really wish her to stay——"

The halting words trailed off into silence. Much as she enjoyed her young sister's company, she could not prevent a feeling of regret at his readiness to submit to this protracted invasion of their homelife. He had chafed so much in the past at these interruptions in the ordinary routine on the grounds that she was never available when he wanted her. She had loved his grumbling, and his outbursts of boyish rejoicing when he had her and his home once more to himself. Those care-free, jolly days seemed a long way back in the past. She supposed she was over-exacting. Plenty of married people of her acquaintance went their separate ways, and seemed happy enough in their independence. People who lived together always, inclined to grow a little indifferent after a time. She had believed that her case would be otherwise; now she was finding out her mistake, and the revelation hurt.

During the next few days, preceding his departure, Allerton made an effort to throw off his abstraction; and, divining in a measure the state of his wife's feelings, did all in his power to make up to her for his past neglect. But although he succeeded in making her temporarily happy, the wrong of which he was guilty towards her was beyond redress.

He was glad to get away—to be free from the constant reproach of her unsuspicious presence—free from

the torment of the nearness of the woman whom he loved and whom he dared no longer meet. He was fleeing from temptation. Flight is evasion. Temptation has to be faced and fought with and overcome.



BOOK III: TEMPTATION

"Seek not temptation, then, which to avoid were better."

MILTON.

BOOK III: TEMPTATION

CHAPTER XVIII.

LIGHTS blazed from every window of the magnificent house which Wootten had built for his wife. The grounds were lit from end to end with hundreds of coloured lanterns that lent a brilliant effect to the scene, and shone amber and rose and emerald in the dusk of the moonless, star-lit night. Everywhere there were flowers, flowers of rich and gorgeous colouring; scentless blooms of brilliant hues, and blooms with a heavy perfume, the sweet fragrance of which filled the air. The broad stoep, screened with bunting and brilliant with many electric lights, was massed with plants like some wonderful and rare hothouse—flowers that flaunted their daring colouring, and more delicate blooms, banked with maidenhair and palms, showing palely in the glare of artificial light.

It was a scene of splendid extravagance, of prodigal profusion and wonderful artistic effect. Nothing had been spared, either in money or in thought, that might add to the sensuous delight of an entertainment which for magnificence and attention to detail had never been surpassed in Port Elizabeth. Wootten had given caterers and florists a free hand, and the result justified his liberality and exceeded his expectation.

This extravagant outlay had been planned to give Gerda pleasure. She had wanted everything done on a grand scale, and her wishes had been carried out regardless of cost. For once in his life Wootten entered into the spirit of the thing, and displayed an extraordinary interest in the perfect arrangement of everything, from the hand and the floor and the decorations, to the Indian waiters, in white and crimson, who served refreshments untiringly throughout the evening, and added a picturesque touch to the splendour of their surroundings.

Satisfied and quietly pleased, Wootten surveyed the scene while he waited for his wife to finish dressing and join him. She kept him waiting a long time. The business of dressing for her party engrossed all her attention. She stood before one of the long mirrors in her room and scrutinised herself with earnest, critical eyes for a long while after she was dressed. Overhead a cluster light shone brightly on her rich hair, on the white softness of her skin, set off by the dress of gold tissue which revealed the beautiful lines of neck and shoulders and the slender grace of her figure; shone on the necklace of coloured diamonds, deep as the topaz and more brilliant, which Wootten had given her recently, and which she had selected because it toned with her dress; shone on the sweet face, flushed and gravely thoughtful, with red lips slightly parted, the warm, brown eyes filled with an expression that was almost wistful. It was not the look one would expect to see in the eyes of a happy woman anticipating an evening of pleasure; the fun and laughter which so often played there were absent to-night.

She turned from surveying herself and looked about

the room—a spacious, richly furnished apartment, with long windows opening on to a balcony overlooking the garden which was her delight—a dream garden in the making, which the years would perfect, and which to-night was transformed into a very fairyland of light and colour.

She crossed the room and stood by one of the windows and looked out upon the brilliant scene; and her face was sad. All this was the result of a whim, and, like most whims when gratified, the pleasure in it was past. Her joy in her new home was clouded, as her pleasure in the evening was clouded, with the knowledge that these things came to her through the husband whom she did not love, towards whom she was disloyal in her every thought.

She fought hard against this disloyalty. In her earnestness to overcome her growing indifference she forced herself to the performance of many simple kindnesses which deceived Wootten into thinking she was growing to care more for him; and his grateful love showed itself in increased attention to her wishes, adding thereby a hundredfold to her distress. He was so good to her. She hated herself for the duplicity she practised daily in regard to him. To-night she knew that he was feeling pleased and confident of her approval. She determined to go down and give him the satisfaction of hearing her express appreciation of his efforts. He had earned that at least.

But still she remained at the window, reluctant to go downstairs. Her thoughts took another turn. Allerton had declined the invitation to the dance. She had not seen him since the day he had declared his love for her, nearly two months ago. Part of the intervening

time, she knew, had been spent in Cape Town; but he was home now, and she had hoped, until his refusal came, that he would attend her party. His refusal had seemed to set the sign of renunciation upon their friendship; and this galled her the more because the initiative had not been hers. She wanted to see him again. It is a woman's way to play with emotion. She finds it less easy than the man to cease to do a thing simply because the doing is dangerous. She wanted to go on with the friendship and ignore the danger. She still believed this to be possible. Allerton knew better. He wanted more than her friendship: half measures would not satisfy him; it must be all or nothing. And he knew that it remained for him to do the fighting. Gerda was only a girl—a girl in love, and chafed with the uncongenial conditions of her lot. If he failed in his part the thing would end in disaster. He did not want that to happen if he could avert it. The fight was a hard one, but it was worthy of the effort. To lose were to forfeit too much in honour and self-respect.

But to Gerda his avoidance pointed to indifference. He had said that after a brief separation, of absence on his side, they would be able to meet again in the ordinary way. And she wanted so urgently to see him. She had ceased to consider the wrong in meeting him; she recognised only her longing for his presence, and would admit no wrong into her thoughts of him. If she could only see him occasionally, she told herself, that would be enough. She felt that she could not go on, knowing that he was in the same place and never to see him. It was expecting too much of her.

She turned away from the window and prepared to

go down. The sight of her dispirited reflection as she glanced again in the glass in passing horrified her. She paused, frowning at her mirrored face with quick impatience. It would not do to wear that expression during the evening.

With a determined effort she threw off the feeling of depression and went out on to the landing, a shining, golden figure, the splendour of which called forth exclamations of delighted admiration from the house-keeper, who waited near the staircase to obtain a glimpse of her before she descended. Gerda paused to allow the old woman a closer inspection, and laughed at the extravagance of her expressions of admiration.

"You are as beautiful as an angel in that gold dress," Mrs. Martin said.

"An angel!" Gerda's smile was rather wistful. "An angel would be out of place here and in these clothes," she said. "She would creep away from my garden to-night, and come back again when all the lights were turned low and dying out. It's carnival to-night—not Paradise. I'm glad you like my dress."

She halted when she was half-way down the stairs, and looked up into the old face regarding her with respectful fondness from the landing.

"Mind, there is to be no sitting up for me. Angels can be surprisingly disagreeable between three and four a.m. It upsets them to see tired faces."

Mrs. Martin smiled, and smiling went into the bedroom to straighten the disorder which Gerda had made.

At the foot of the stairs Wootten waited for his wife. He took her hand and held it while he looked her over with proud, appreciative eyes. Her beauty was a source of continual pleasure to him: he never tired of

observing her fairness, but loved just to watch her, as some people love to watch a sunset or the changing wonders of the sea. She delighted his senses.

"Do I look nice?" she asked, embarrassed as much by his silence as by his long scrutiny, and strangely irritated at having to submit to this inspection.

Wootten released her. She was relieved that he made no offer to kiss her; she had feared he would do this.

"It's more than nice," he said. "Words fail me. What a wonderful thing a woman's dress can be! You have excellent taste, Gerda. Come out on to the stoep and see the illuminations. It's all very pretty."

She went with him, and stood beside him at the head of the steps and looked at the brilliant scene of light and colour with brightening eyes. In a very short while now the lighted gardens would be thronged with people, and the big, empty rooms would be filled and echoing with laughter. A thrill of excitement ran through her. She would seize the hour and enjoy herself, and banish thought and the cares thought brought in its train—just for to-night.

"It's lovely!" she cried—"like a child's fairy-tale realised. You have done things on a princely scale. I'm quite excited."

She looked along the stoep at the flowers massed there, their beauty sacrificed to a few hours' pleasure, and noted the lounges which they screened cunningly placed for rest between the dances. There were other sitting-out places in the grounds. Nothing had been overlooked that could add to the comfort and pleasure of the guests.

"I'm glad that you are pleased," Wootten said.

"I believe you have enjoyed doing this," Gerda exclaimed.

"Certainly I have. I did it for you. You wanted a party. It is the first I have ever arranged. For the matter of that it is the first of its kind that I have attended. You are bringing me into line, you see."

She smiled faintly.

"For one night," she said.

But there had been more in Wootten's speech than she realised. He was resolved that in future he would accompany his wife wherever she went, no matter how little inclined he felt for such activity. He was growing a little restive in regard to her, and jealous of her independence of him.

"Oh I think my cultivated taste for dissipation will be more enduring than that," he said. He touched her arm. "There comes the first motor. Our guests are arriving."

For the next half-hour Gerda was busy receiving the arrivals, a slender, girlish hostess, standing beside the insignificant figure of the middle-aged host whose wealth had provided this magnificent entertainment, and whose generosity sought to gratify his young wife's every whim. In the crush of the arrivals the host was sometimes overlooked, but never the hostess. She stood there, a radiant figure, laughing and chatting with her guests, and listening to the expressions of admiration which the splendour of the scene evoked.

The Allertons' party was among the earlier arrivals. Beryl, the embodiment of girlish gaiety was escorted by Jack Densham; Maud Allerton looking tired, and wearing an air of forced brightness, followed them. Wootten expressed regret at the absence of her hus-

band; and she gave him a brief smile as she answered that he and George appeared to be changing places.

"I told him I couldn't invent excuses for him," she added. "He is off parties for the time. I am so disappointed."

"So am I," Wootten said. "I counted on him to support me."

"I will tell him that you are both annoyed with him," Mrs. Allerton said with feigned lightness.

Gerda turned to her quickly.

"Tell him that I am hurt," she said—"not annoyed—that he would not come to my party."

Beryl intervened her small person between them and caught at Gerda's arm.

"I want to touch you to make sure that you're real," she said. "You are just a dream to look at."

"It's all a dream," Gerda answered, smiling—"a dream that will vanish in the morning when the dawn breaks."

CHAPTER XIX

THE dawn broke palely long before the lights were extinguished, and while the guests still danced untiringly to the enticing strains of the band. Only a few people observed the thin line of light in the east which told that the night was spent and the pleasures of the night were drawing to a finish.

Wootten, tired, and looking worried, despite the undoubted success of the affair, surveyed the broadening band of white cutting the darkness with weary satisfaction. He wanted his house to himself. He wanted to shut the doors upon all these careless, light-hearted people, partaking of his hospitality with such evident enjoyment—wanted more particularly to shut his doors against one man, who of all the guests was privileged to enjoy his hostess's especial favour.

Trevor's marked attentions and Gerda's encouragement of them inflamed Wootten's anger. He had been jealous of the man before that night; but never before that night had Gerda allowed herself to be made conspicuous by any man's particular homage. She had deliberately encouraged Trevor. She had danced more often with him than with any other partner. Wootten, on the alert and ceaselessly watchful, had noted how frequently they were together, how often when he missed her she would be seen returning from the seclusion of the grounds in Trevor's

company. His jealous anger exaggerated matters, till it seemed to him that others noticed her preference also and commented on it. Whenever he observed people looking at his wife he believed they were criticising her behaviour and pitying him. It enraged him that Gerda should be so careless of appearances as to allow her name to be coupled with that of a man who was notoriously fast, a cad who would boast openly of her partiality to any one who cared to listen. It was the last time, he resolved, that the man should darken his doors. He meant to have that quite clear at least.

Maud Allerton also saw the dawn break with a feeling of relief. She was in no mood for gaiety. Her heart was heavy within her, and her mind was perplexed and harassed with doubts. This woman, whose pleasant life had been so free from trouble hitherto, was slowly waking to the fact that her husband had ceased to care for her. His indifference was growing daily; and he no longer strove to conceal this from her. Perhaps he could not. The dual part of a married man in love with another woman, obliged to conceal the absence of love for his wife, and his illicit passion, becomes impossible after a while to sustain. Allerton had given up the attempt, satisfied that so long as he kept under his passion, no more could be expected of him. His wife realised the waning of his affection for her, but she did not suspect the cause. There never had been anything in his conduct to suggest such a possibility. But the withdrawal of his love from her hurt terribly. It was like slow amputation endured without an anæsthetic. The future shorn of the satisfaction of the old good-comradeship seemed

very dark and hopeless—hopeless as the blackness of the night sky before the dawn broke and drew that thin, pale line of promise athwart the darkness. There wasn't any dawn, so far as she could see, in her life at all. Something assured her that what she had lost was lost to her for ever—it was like the hand of truth, which inscribes facts with merciless conviction upon the open page of life, writing beneath her name the crude, bald statement of failure. Somehow she had been at fault. There must be something lacking in her that she could not keep the love of the man whom she loved with all her soul.

And the pity of it was that she could not talk the matter out with him and learn in what she failed. She had to go on acting a part and ignore the ugly fact that they were drifting apart. Any allusion to these things excited his resentment and widened the gulf of misunderstanding which already separated them. They were following the lead of several married people whom she knew, living together in amicable indifference, divorced in sympathy, but in every outward appearance united and happy. This sham happiness was a constant humiliation to her. The enforced keeping up of appearances before her world was hateful to her candid nature. She felt dispirited and sad as she of light which defied the pallid dawn.

"You are tired," Wootten said to her, and seated himself on the lounge beside her, and pulled a flower at his elbow to pieces.

"A little," she answered, leaning back against the cushions restfully, with her face turned towards him. She was thinking the same about him. He looked worn and old. "The day is coming."

"Yes," he said. "I have been watching that streak in the sky for some minutes."

"When it broadens we shall flit away like the bats," she said. "It has been a wonderful party, Fred."

She seldom since his marriage called him by his Christian name, though before his marriage they had both addressed each other so. She used his name now unconsciously; possibly the grey weariness of his look, so akin to her own feelings, recalled the once familiar address. He noticed it and looked pleased.

"It's kind of you to say so. At the risk of appearing ungracious, I am bound to confess that that streak in the sky heartens me. I'm too old to start this sort of thing, Maud. I have been sitting this past hour, like David Copperfield, propping my lids open to keep myself awake. It amazes me to see how fresh most of the people look."

Gerda passed close to them on Trevor's arm, going towards the garden. Wootten half started up, with some idea in his mind of intercepting them, but sat down again, and glanced covertly at Mrs. Allerton, to see if she had noticed anything. She was fully alive, both to his agitation and to the fact that Gerda was behaving indiscreetly, but her face betrayed nothing; and Wootten, regretting his hasty impulse, sought to explain it.

"I thought of asking her to sit here with us," he said; "but I suppose that would be scarcely fair to her partner."

He took up the fan lying in her lap and played with it nervously. Maud Allerton was surprised to find him so restless and worried. He looked up suddenly

towards the brightening light in the east and closed the fan briskly with a little snap.

"She won't be as pleased as I am to see that," he said.

Mrs. Allerton laughed.

"You are just a boy at heart, Fred," she remarked, "and rather a disagreeable boy at the moment. Because the toys she likes to play with don't amuse you, you want to put them out of her reach."

"Am I as bad as that?" he said, and smiled. "I thought I was doing quite the opposite. Perhaps I am disagreeable. It will take two successive nights' rest to get over this. And Gerda looks as fresh as paint."

"She looks very lovely," Mrs. Allerton said warmly. "It is a pleasure to watch her; she seems so happy."

"Yes," he said quickly, and glanced at her with almost pathetic eagerness. "She looks happy, doesn't she? That ought to be a sufficient recompense for the loss of a night's sleep."

The happiness of her expression passed from Gerda's face, as she left the lighted stoep and disappeared amid the shadows of the garden, which the coloured lanterns, many of them extinguished, lit with fitful uncertainty; the mask was discarded when the need for wearing it was past.

The man who walked with her, and who led her to a quiet seat where they could watch the scene in undisturbed solitude, elated with his success, was curiously unobservant of her mood. She had been very sweet to him. Her graciousness exceeded his utmost expectation; none the less, he found it impossible to advance beyond a certain point in the friendship she

offered with such apparent readiness. There was that in her manner which restrained him when tempted to greater familiarity. Behind the sweet gaiety was an aloofness, a sort of cool indifference, which he could not bridge. She fascinated and perplexed him more than any woman he had ever known.

He sat very close to her, with his arm stretched along the back of her seat, in close proximity with her shoulder—the nearest approach to a caress that he dared to venture upon. To any one passing within view of them his arm gave an impression of encircling her, which was what he intended it should do. Gerda, unconscious of, or indifferent to, this, reclined listlessly, with her face turned towards the dawn. The feel of the new day was in the chill, hushed stillness of the air; it struck cold and pure upon her face and neck. The freshness of it was grateful after the heated rooms.

"See the day breaks," she said softly. "Soon my dream garden will awake to the warmth of the sun. Already the lights burn dim. I feel a little sad at the passing of the night. The night is my time. I love the warm darkness, when the world sleeps and the golden stars throb in the dusk. Africa is wonderful then—a land for poets."

"It doesn't breed poets," he returned practically. "We deal principally in company promoters and Rand millionaires. Minerals pay better than imagination." He put out a hand and touched the sparkling gems she wore about her throat. "Africa produces these. They are a poem in themselves. And the wearer——"

He stopped abruptly, ending his speech in a brief laugh. She looked towards him inquiringly.

"And the wearer?" she repeated.

"Is an inspiration for the finest poem ever written," he answered. "It isn't the gems one admires, when you wear them."

"You don't look very deep," she said, smiling faintly, with her eyes averted, following the line of light in the sky. "You are caught with glitter. If these gems lay in a heap, just roughly, as they came from the ground, would you call them a poem then?"

"I should call them a pleasant little find," he said, and laughed.

"Just so," she nodded. "They represent capital. We both appreciate the importance of that."

"It's not to be despised," he said.

"Ah, no! I don't despise it. I see it in everything about me, and it is very good—but it is not a poem. And I am not an inspiration. I am a materialist. All that appeals to the senses delights me. I love beautiful things, and easy living, and sweet scents and sounds. But the things which matter—sadness and pain and the drab realities of life—these are hateful to me. Do you remember the bitter time that followed the war, when every one was striving after his own ends, forgetful of his responsibility to the community?—That spirit animates me. I want things my way. I want to twist life to suit my purpose. Does selfishness bring satisfaction, I wonder?—or is goodness the more satisfying quality?"

"Good people are so dull," he returned lazily, and brought his hand closer to her shoulder. "I believe in having a jolly time while one can, and in seizing everything that comes one's way. I intend to have no regrets when I come to the finish. To deny

oneself pleasure from a sense of duty is a form of superogatory foolishness with which I have no sympathy. Simply, I can't understand it. 'Resist everything but everything but temptation.' Wilde said; and he knew something about life."

She looked at him strangely, with a wondering scrutiny, as though she weighed him rather than what he said. His concluding sentence jarred on her.

"His philosophy lacks conviction," she replied. "One doesn't choose deliberately to walk in the footsteps of failure."

"No," he allowed slowly, keeping his bold eyes fixed upon her face. "But many people who admit his irresistible minimum make a glorious success of life. To follow pleasure fearlessly, is to enjoy to the full; to live timidly brings regret. We should obey our natural impulses."

He leaned nearer to her, till his hot breath fanned her cheek.

"I want to kiss you—desperately badly," he said imploringly. "Won't you permit me that happiness—you beautiful inspiration?"

She smiled coolly into his eyes, with no sign of anger and no thought of yielding in her look.

"That is your idea of happiness," she said—"to make love to every woman whom you meet. How many women have you wanted to kiss—desperately badly?"

"I swear——" he began in eager accents; but she silenced him with a little laugh and a swift gesture of her hand.

"I know," she said. "I've heard it all before. But I think you are forgetting that a married woman's

kisses are not to be had for the asking. If you want my friendship, you may have it—but not that way.”

He sat a little straighter, flushed and obviously annoyed. He had believed that she wanted him to make love to her, and he resented the snub of her refusal; it hurt his pride.

“You are rather hard on me,” he said.

“I think not,” Gerda answered. “All things considered, I have been kinder than you deserve.”

She rose and laid her hand lightly on his arm. He stood beside her stiffly in sulky silence.

“We will go back,” she said. “It is depressing to sit and watch the day breaking and the stars grow pale. Sentiment is out of place in the dawn.” She observed his glum expression, and her own face softened. When she spoke again it was in kinder tones. “Do not look so gloomy, my friend. To-night I have made one regret the less for you—when you come to the finish.”

CHAPTER XX

THE stars had paled into insignificance, and most of the coloured lights in the garden had burned out, before the last of the Woottens' guests bade their reluctant farewells and departed in the brightening dawn. Somewhere in the distance a wakeful cock crowed lustily.

Gerda walked slowly through the deserted rooms, which wore a look of chill emptiness and disorder with the departure of the merry crowd that had so lately filled them. The sight of their emptiness, of the odds and ends—a glove, a withered flower, or other trifle—lying unheeded on the polished floor struck her unpleasantly. It all looked forlorn and cheerless with the daylight stealing wanly in through the open windows, which Wooten was busily closing, having already extinguished the lights on the stoep.

Gerda watched her husband securing doors and windows, but made no attempt to assist him. She would have gone to bed and left them wide to the cold, pure air that stole in with the pallid dawn, but Wooten's more order-loving mind found satisfaction in making all secure. He finished shutting the windows, and started to switch off the lights. Gerda emitted a little laugh when he came and stood beside her in the empty ballroom.

"The morning after the night before!" she said flip-

pantly. "There is an appearance of dissipation in the jaded look of everything—even in you. Do I wear an up-all-night air, too?"

He scrutinised her attentively, and was amazed at the wide-eyed wakefulness, the freshness of her look.

"I don't know how you do it," he said, yawning sleepily. "I want to get to bed. Thank goodness it's over! Come along! I am about to turn off the lights."

He spoke with slight impatience. She knew that, besides feeling tired, he was displeased with her. The knowledge left her curiously unconcerned. She would have welcomed it as a relief had he started to upbraid her for conduct which she knew to be harmless. She had acted that night in a spirit of defiance, actuated by what motive she scarcely knew. At the back of her mind some vague idea of covering her passion for Allerton by a simulated preference for a man whose vanity placed him beyond her consideration suggested the present indiscretion. She was careless of public opinion, careless of everything, save her desire for the man who avoided her, and her anxiety to conceal this from the world.

"Our love is our secret—to guard from the world," Allerton had said. And she meant to guard it, as jealously as he. But she wanted to satisfy her hunger also—wanted to see and speak with him again. She was restless with her longing for him. It consumed her like a fever. The thought of him, the memory of his kisses, was never absent from her mind. She could not understand why they should deny themselves the pleasure of meeting. There was no harm in that. And she wanted him so. . . .

She turned away without speaking in response to

Wootten's insistence, and went leisurely up the stairs. The lights blazed on the landings and in the upper rooms. She looked back over her shoulder down into the hall, which Wootten had already darkened; and she saw him, a black figure, emerging out of the blackness and following her swiftly upward into the light, saw the bald place on his head, and his plain, earnest face, graver than usual, lifted, observing her as she mounted in front of him. A ridiculous sense of panic seized her. She had a feeling that she must keep him in view, that she dared not face the other way and go on with the knowledge that he was behind her, following her up the stairs.

To her dismay he caught up with her, but, though she made way for him, he did not attempt to pass her, but kept step and step with her. On the landing he put his hand on her arm and detained her while he switched off the lights there. Then he walked with her to her bedroom door and entered with her. There was an air of conscious proprietorship in all he did which exasperated Gerda. She had never seen him in this mood before; he was appearing in a new, and rather disagreeable, rôle.

"I was listening to the talk of a small group of men to-night," Wootten said, steadily regarding his wife, while she stood rigid, and manifestly surprised, beneath the cluster lights before the dressing-table. "They did not see me, and were not aware that they could be overheard. What they said was not very pleasant for me to hear."

"What did they say?" Gerda asked.

"They were guilty of the bad taste of making invidious comparisons between our ages," he said.

"Oh, that!" Gerda shrugged her shoulders. "You are above being annoyed at that."

"I am of the opinion," he returned, "that that matter is the business of no one except ourselves. But when I hear it raised as a reason why my wife amuses herself by flirting with the fastest man in town, I feel distinctly irritated. I beg you to remember in future that I resent being made a laughing-stock of while you amuse yourself in a fashion altogether unworthy of you. You will strike Mr. Trevor's name off your visiting list. I refuse to admit him to the house. I am not arbitrary, and I hope I am not jealous; but if you can't guard your reputation, I will."

She drew away from him and turned to the dressing-table, and stood playing with a little stoppered bottle on it, and refrained from looking at him.

"I think it is all very silly," she said presently, without turning round.

"So do I," Wootten answered unexpectedly. "That's what I am objecting to. I don't choose to be made ridiculous. I shan't speak of this again, Gerda. I have said what I intended to say. We will forget it."

She faced round then, her eyes flashing with the first sign of anger.

"You treat me like a child," she said.

"Only when you act like one," he answered quietly. "You are a child neither in years nor understanding. Don't misunderstand me, dear. I am not making any quarrel with you."

He approached her again, but made no attempt to touch her. Perhaps he hoped she would turn to him and give him the usual good-night kiss, which was often a very perfunctory caress on her side, but which

he valued none the less. She did not do this. She felt and looked annoyed.

"Oh, quarrel!" she returned. "We haven't sunk to that, I hope."

She took off the diamond necklace and shut it away in its case, and busied herself with unfastening her dress. He watched her for a moment or so in silence, at a loss to find anything of a conciliatory nature to say, and loath to end up on the note of hostility which he had detected in her voice. He hated anything suggestive of estrangement between them.

The sight of him hovering near her dressing-table worried Gerda. She felt, without seeing, his watchful eye upon her while she removed the shimmering golden dress and threw it carelessly upon a sofa. She wished he would go. When presently he left the room with a briefly uttered good-night, she was seized with swift remorse for having allowed him to go with no kinder word from her. An impulse to follow him to his dressing-room and give him the kiss which she knew he had waited for and wanted, moved her to cross the room; but at the door disinclination to obey the kindly prompting rose stronger than the impulse; and she retraced her steps, and, dissatisfied with herself and vexed with him, undressed and prepared for bed.

"I am a beast," she murmured—"a little selfish, catty beast. Stroke me and I purr, rub me the wrong way and I scratch. . . . I wish I had kissed him. . . . No, I don't. I wish I need never kiss him again."

The talk of which Wootten had complained was repeated at the club. Allerton heard it with something like a shock of anger, and with a strong disposition

to quarrel with the man who bandied about Gerda's name with such mischievous familiarity.

It was Fielding who broached the subject to him, taking his knowledge of events, as an intimate friend of the Woottens, for granted. He thought it regrettable that Mrs. Wootten should be allowed to make a fool of her husband. Some one ought to drop him a hint.

"She is just a vain little fool, after all," he said. "And Trevor has been mixed up in more than one scandal in the place. If I had a wife, and he came hanging about her, I'd let daylight through him. Sneaking after other men's wives is a bit too low. The man who is guilty of that isn't worth any decent woman's thought."

Allerton refused to be drawn into a discussion on morals. He answered shortly, giving in effect the lie to the whole thing, and left the club in a fit of almost uncontrollable anger. He did not believe that there was any substantial foundation for the gossip; but that Gerda by her actions should give grounds for such talk, enraged him. He resented it as he would have resented it had she in truth belonged to him. He felt that she did belong to him by reason of their mutual love. It was inconceivable that she should amuse herself to the extent of getting talked about with a man like Trevor.

The talk had hit him. He was jealous. He realised that with a queer sense of shame. Fielding's words recurred to him, uttered with no suspicion of their applicability to him, and yet so disconcertingly true: "Sneaking after other men's wives is a bit too low." It was low. It wasn't honest. And that in substance

was what he himself was guilty of, in thought if not in deed.

Strangely, the talk in his own house revived the idle reports from the club. Beryl, who remained throughout Gerda's admiring ally, was retailing to her sister some gossip she had heard at the tennis courts that afternoon. Gerda had been playing with Trevor for her partner. If he were not allowed to visit at the house he contrived to meet her elsewhere.

"Every one was talking," Beryl declared. "They don't see that she is just making a fool of him. His devotion is ridiculous. And she only laughs. It's a game to her."

"I wish she wouldn't play that sort of game," Maud Allerton answered. "It isn't very amusing for her husband."

"He is such a dry stick," Beryl said. "A little jealousy won't hurt him. I would be bored stiff if I were married to Mr. Wootten. Do you see any harm in a mild flirtation, George? she asked, appealing to her brother-in-law, who had listened without comment to the talk.

"There is considerable harm in all this disgusting cackle," he answered shortly. "I should think the Woottens might be left to manage their own affairs."

"George, has such a nice, amiable way of expressing himself of late," Beryl complained. "My nose is not my best feature, but I object to having it snapped off."

"Don't talk nonsense then," he advised. "I hate having the gossip of the place brought into the house."

He flung out of the room, ashamed of his ill-temper, but unable to suppress it, and aware of the silent

amazement in which his wife and Beryl watched his going—aware, too, that when he had gone they would comment on his inexcusable rudeness. And he did not care. He had got beyond caring what they thought of him. Life—the whole business of living—was becoming such a muddle. He had one fixed idea in his brain, begotten of what sudden development he scarcely knew: he could he would see Gerda, and discuss the subject of their relations with her—he would talk the matter threadbare, and discover whether they could not salvage something out of the wreck of things.

CHAPTER XXI

THEY met in the garden. He had written her a note to inform her of his purpose; and Gerda, surprised and made nervously happy by his unexpected resolve, stole away in the dusk to meet him, leaving her husband seated before his organ in the music-room, playing, as he played now whenever they were alone in the evenings, because Gerda liked to hear the music while she wandered among her sleeping flowers, or sat and dreamed on the stoep.

The sound of the organ fell wailingly on her ears as she walked towards the gate in the gathering darkness. A shamed remorse touched her heart; and she halted and looked back towards the lighted house, which stood out like a beacon urging her return; but by the gate the man she loved waited expectantly, and love also tugged at her heart-strings and overcame remorse.

With a swift, shamed flush suffusing her face, she hurried on, and, a little breathless, less from haste than from nervousness, she reached the gate, and was caught up in a pair of strong arms and held closely and kissed. The hungry passion of those kisses acted like balm on her discontented spirit. She lay still in his arms and allowed him to kiss her, and was silent.

Allerton was the first to speak, the first to recover from the mad rush of emotion which had swept him

off his balance. He realised quite clearly what he had done. In kissing her thus he had taken the first deliberate step on the downward path of dishonour. The result, as he saw it, was inevitable. There might follow a time of indecision, of insincere scruples and evasions, but the final act in all its ugliness stood starkly revealed to his senses. He was not going to give her up for all the scruples in the world.

Something to that effect he whispered to her while he held her; and she did not answer him, but remained passive in his embrace.

Gently he released her, and stood back a step and surveyed her eagerly. Then he put his arm about her and drew her within the shadow of the palms.

"I've tried, Gerda," he said, "I've tried hard to subdue my feelings. My dear, I might as well try to stop breathing as attempt to kill my love for you. It's a part of my life. We've got to face it, dear, and come to some decision. I can't go on like this—can you?"

"I don't think I can," she answered in a low voice. "I don't know what to do."

She was crying quietly. He heard her sob as she turned her face aside. Against her volition her gaze sought the lighted windows, just visible through the parting in the palms. Up at the house Wootten continued to play, unconscious of the danger that threatened his home. They could hear the organ as they paced together in the dusk.

"If you hadn't kept away," she said tearfully, "I think—I could have borne it better. It's the want of you that has broken my courage. I meant to fight. . . . And now I've given in."

"I meant to fight too," he said, and thought a moment. "I wonder. . . . Are we being honest, Gerda? Did we mean to fight? Wasn't it, perhaps, that, though we wanted one another, we were too proud to acknowledge it? I'm not proud any longer. I'm just hungry for you. What are we going to do about it? That's the question we've got to decide. It's no use shirking it. We have got to make up our minds."

"Is that why you came to-night?" she asked, with a sound of fear in her voice.

"I suppose so. For that, and other reasons. I've been hearing things about you—gossip. It doesn't amount to much; but I can't stand that."

She turned to him quickly.

"You know there is nothing in that," she said. "But I'm just desperate, dear. You kept away from me. If I can see you sometimes I can keep square. I can go on. But when I don't see you, then I haven't any hope. Come to me sometimes—in the dusk—like this . . . and life won't be so hard."

"We couldn't do it," he said, "and not be found out."

"I suppose we couldn't," she said tonelessly.

"Would it matter so much if we were found out?" he asked.

He drew her closer to him, pressing her against his side. It seemed to him then that it would not matter if the whole world knew, so long as they were together. But the thought of detection frightened Gerda. She had not accustomed herself to that idea. Her whole nature revolted against the possibility of an open scandal.

"We can't do that," she said. "Think of what

it would mean! It isn't just ourselves. I—I couldn't face it."

"You needn't stay to face it," he said. "We could go away. I'm not sure that that isn't what we ought to do—go away together—openly—to England."

She paused, dismayed, and looked at him with frightened eyes. He was so much more reckless than she was, more indifferent to the world's opinion. His courage outstripped hers, and his honesty. She wanted to have him for her lover and to keep her place in the world. He wanted only her—nothing else weighed with him. But a man in these cases always stands to lose less than the woman: the big step which means so much is taken at infinitely less cost on his side. He can make good again his place in the world; the woman, save in very exceptional and isolated instances, cannot do this. And she knows it. When the irrevocable step is taken hers is the greater sacrifice.

"Dear," she said softly, "I'm frightened. I never thought of anything like this. I thought perhaps—I don't know what I thought," she added a little wildly. "I just wanted to see you, and—let you live in my heart. Can't we—just love and keep our secret? Then we shouldn't be hurting any one—not to matter, I mean."

"I hate secrecy," he said. "And it's impossible beyond a certain point. It's been tried times beyond number, but I never heard that it succeeded. We'll try it, if you like. We can always bolt when the thing becomes impossible."

Seeing her shrink away from him, he put his arms about her and drew her again into his embrace.

"You are nervous, dear. It's the suddenness of the idea, that's all. These matters appear more difficult in contemplation. When it comes to the point, love carries one over the difficulties. It will be plain sailing when you make up your mind. You will find the difficulties will resolve themselves with astonishing ease. There will follow divorce proceedings, and after that it will be simple. We can get married quietly and go to some other country and start afresh."

It might seem simple to him, but to Gerda his talk of divorce and its attendant publicity was terrifying. She thought of her husband, of the blow it would be to him—of her mother, who was so proud of her, and who would be wounded to the very soul by the disgrace—lastly, she thought of Maud Allerton and the hurt to her pride. She did not believe that Maud Allerton cared for her husband very deeply, but she realised that his desertion of her would be a bitter grief and a source of great humiliation. In seizing her own happiness she would strike at three people, all of whom she respected and one whom she loved. It was a big price to pay for purely selfish ends.

In her terror and uncertainty she clung to him, weeping hopelessly, with her face hidden against his shoulder. He felt her trembling in his embrace, and sought to comfort her. It was the shock of the thing which upset her; he realised that, and set about reassuring her. There was no need to hurry her. They could, as she suggested, continue as they were for a while.

"Don't worry, little love," he said. "Take time to consider matters. We won't act precipitately. I'm always here, to be counted on. When life grows im-

possible, you can let me know, and we'll take the only way out. I'm your lover—yours only. We'll get what we can out of life. When our damn world makes it impossible the remedy is in our hands. The decision will remain with you. Gerda, look up, dear love. You mustn't weep. Let me kiss the tears away."

She lifted her face from his shoulder, tear-stained and contorted, and looked back at him with anguish in the look.

He stooped and kissed her lips, kissed the tears from her eyes. Then, keeping his arm about her, he drew her onward into the darkness of the shadowed garden.

And up at the house Wootten played on, unconscious that his wife was with her lover and his one-time friend.

An hour later he closed the instrument and walked to the open window and looked out along the stoep. The stoep was in darkness. Gerda preferred the darkness; but Wootten, whose eyesight was no longer keen, switched on the light before going outside. She was not there. He sat down with a newspaper and read until she made her appearance, walking slowly along one of the many paths winding between its borders of flowering shrubs. She came on deliberately, and he saw her stop when she reached the circle of light below the stoep. She was wearing a green dress; the light caught the folds of satin and reflected its emerald sheen. For some reason this irritated Wootten. He disliked green; he disliked to see her wear it. He put aside the paper he was holding and went down the steps and joined her. It was the reflection of the green dress, he supposed, that made her look so pale.

"What amusement do you find, I wonder, in wandering about a garden at night?" he said, not noticing that she drew away from him; he thought that she had stepped aside to examine a flower. "It's too dark to see anything."

"Not when one knows every flower which blooms," she replied, "and where to look for it. I love my garden always, but best at night."

"Well, the first woman was placed in a garden," he said, smiling. "I suppose yours is an inherited instinct. Come and show me some of the wonders you alone discover. It's hot indoors."

She glanced at him swiftly, with wide, surprised eyes, and a face that showed whiter than before in her sudden dismay. How could she walk with him in her garden to-night? How could she ever walk there with him again?

"I have a headache," she said, and blushed at this first lie of a series which the new situation was to develop. "I think I would rather not walk any more. Let me rest."

He regarded with a show of anxiety. It was so unusual to hear her complain of indisposition that he felt unnecessarily worried. Possibly the headache, and not the green reflection of her dress, accounted for her pallor.

"I hope you are not going to be ill. You never have headaches," he said.

Gerda laughed mirthlessly.

"Every woman suffers from headache. It's just nerves," she replied. "And I played tennis too long in the sun to-day. Don't make a fuss. I'm never ill. I will go to bed and rest; and there will be no sign of it in the morning."

He detained her on the stoep before letting her go indoors. Despite her assurance, he fancied that she looked feverish. There was an unnatural brightness in her eyes and a hectic flush came and went in her cheeks. He had never seen her look as she looked that night. The expression in her eyes was like that of a wild thing in a gilded captivity from which there was no escape.

"You should reserve your energies in this climate," he said. "Hot countries take it out of Englishwomen more than they realise. If you droop in my care, what will your mother have to say to me? She will tell me I am not to be trusted with the care of you. And the only defence I can put up is that you won't heed my advice."

"No one heeds advice," Gerda replied, "when it doesn't fit in with one's wishes. Don't worry about me. I'm as strong as a mule, and as obstinate."

She laughed, a short, mirthless laugh, and moved towards the door, feigning not to see when he bent forward to kiss her good-night. She felt that she could not have borne the touch of his lips then.

Wootten settled himself into his chair and took up his paper again; and Gerda went quickly up to her room, and closed and locked her door.

"Oh, God!" she cried, standing straight and rigid in the unlighted room, with the stars shining in upon her through the uncurtained windows. "How can I bear it? Oh, dear God. . . .!"

She fell on her knees by the bedside and hid her hot face in her hands.

CHAPTER XXII

IT amazed George Allerton, as the months went by without exciting a breath of suspicion, to find how comparatively simple it was to carry on a love intrigue in a limited community and avoid the embarrassment of detection. He was agreeably surprised at not being found out; discovery had seemed to him inevitable. Doubtless it was inevitable, but it was slow in coming.

The estrangement between himself and his wife had hardened to cold indifference on his part and silent acceptance on hers. She ceased trying to win him back, and resigned herself to circumstances, and left him to go his own way. If she suffered she concealed the fact; and to all outward seeming they remained a united pair. She had not the faintest intimation of his love for Gerda. Oddly no one connected his name with Gerda's. It was fairly widely known that Wootten's marriage was not a success, but the reason of its failure did not transpire. The general opinion was that Wootten had made a mistake in marrying a girl. The mistake was too obvious to excite particular sympathy with the husband. Gerda remained popular, while Wootten retired more and more within himself, and inclined to shun his former friends. He gained the reputation for being morose. Men spoke of him as a man whom matrimony had spoiled, and left him to himself.

No doubt of his wife entered Wootten's mind. That he had failed to win her love, he realised perfectly; and it made him intensely unhappy, even more unhappy on her account than on his own. He had believed when he married her that he could give her all she desired. He had meant so to fill her life with love and kindness that she would forget that he was twice her age, and would learn to care for him, if not as deeply as he cared for her, at least sufficiently to cease to regret the absence of the usual romance a girl looks for in marriage. He knew now that his hope was doomed to disappointment. She so shrank from the love he offered that he no longer attempted the most ordinary form of endearment. Their marriage had resolved itself into a marriage only in name. Yet he loved her still with a great tenderness—with a love so earnest and sincere and self-forgetful that he disregarded his own sorrow in his greater distress for the ruin of her life. Her happiness was his sole aim: he would have sacrificed himself willingly to obtain that, had he known how to set about it. The only thing that remained to him to do was to inflict as little of his society upon her as possible; and this self-effacement he practised daily with a delicacy and gentleness that won her humble gratitude and caused her endless self-reproach. The knowledge of her unworthiness cut deep.

"Why is it," she said to Allerton, "that I cannot love him? He is so good and kind. He's fine. I'm a bad woman. All my heart goes out to you. I'm sick with love for you. We are doing wrong—and I don't care. I would go through fire and water rather than give you up."

"There's no sort of explanation of these things, Gerda," he replied. "It was meant that we should love, I take it. I'm not troubling my head about these matters. I've got you. I'll keep you though all the rotten laws man ever made intervene to separate us. I'm only waiting for you, dear, to take the final step."

"I'm afraid," she breathed, and placed her two hands on his breast and looked into his eyes. "Oh, lover of mine, be patient! I'm afraid—not for myself, but for the lives we are going to wreck."

"It's a bit late to think of that. We've accomplished the wrecking—haven't we?" he said a trifle drily. "Only the damage hasn't been discovered. Delay isn't going to smooth the situation at all. In my opinion all this secrecy aggravates the wrong. I'm for acting openly. It's the better course. And, Gerda—I want you."

"And don't you believe that I want you?" she cried with soft vehemence. "At night I lie awake and think and think and long for you. And every day my mind is filled with thoughts of you. I wander in my garden, and touch the things which you have touched, and wonder whether you are thinking of me with the same sick hunger which tears at my heart all day and all night. And then comes our brief time together, and I am happy once more, and just for a short while I forget."

"And how long is that going to satisfy you?" he asked almost roughly. "I want you all day and every day. An occasional glimpse of Eden doesn't compensate me for being shut out most of the time. I go back to my home, which is home no longer, and I think of you here, and of all the hateful deception,

and it's hell, Gerda! There isn't any other word that expresses it quite. How long are you going to hold out? There is only one course open to us now, dear. We have got to take it some time. I want to take it before we are discovered. Think what it would mean in a small place like this—being found out! Imagine meeting people one knew, and being shunned—cut, in fact. . . . The talk at the club and over the tea-tables! . . . I want to shake the dust of the place off my heels before that moment arrives. I don't cut much of a figure in this affair. The fear of discovery haunts me."

She scrutinised him long and earnestly, with eyes that were soft and tender and infinitely troubled. She fancied that, despite his love for her, stronger than his love for her, remorse tormented him and spoilt his joy in their love. Why had she been so weak? Why had she not kept to her resolve to do her duty by her husband and thrust this love out of her life? Why could not she be strong now and give him up?

"Dear," she said softly, and touched his sleeve with a caressing hand, "I don't think I make you very happy. There's something I can't give you, though I love you so. Perhaps love like ours never entirely satisfies—there's so much in life it has to fight. It is not all glowing hours. When these pass there are the cold, hard facts to face. I know. I face them too. There is a sort of shame—and regret. . . . Sometimes I wish we had never met, then you would have escaped the misery of these things. I have a feeling that you might be happier if I went out of your life—even now."

"Look here!" he said, and caught her by the shoulders in a vice-like grip. "You are talking nonsense. I am not a boy, to be put off like that. You know as well as I do that as long as there is breath in my body I shall want you, and while I want you I will never give you up—not to satisfy the consciences of all the moralists that ever lived. But I don't like acting covertly. And it's the thinnest crust we're walking on: it will break one day. When the first breath of suspicion gets abroad discovery will burst upon us like a volcanic eruption. But I've said all I intend to say on that subject. You must make up your own mind. When you are ready, I am."

Gerda slipped her arms about his neck and pulled his face down to hers and kissed him.

"One day," she whispered, "I will go with you, and we will be together all our lives, and life will be one long, glad dream. I'll shut my eyes and my ears and my heart to the past. In the sunshine of your love I will forget the clouds which darken our sky. It can't be wrong to love as we do—not really wrong. Love is so strong. It isn't any use to fight against it—it isn't any use at all. My dear, why do I love you so? It isn't any choice of mine. If I tore the heart out of my body, all the bleeding, quivering nerves of me would go on loving you."

He gathered her close in his arms and held her tightly to him and, with his lips upon hers, silenced her with his kisses.

He could not understand her reluctance to take the final step: he felt a little impatient with what he deemed the capriciousness of her irritated demand for time. Since they had become lovers it seemed

to him that the only decent course left to them was flight. He had planned the affair in its completest detail; it only remained for her to make up her mind. He had urged this course on her for weeks, and always he was met with the same evasive reply. The thought of the publicity, of the scandal and its far-reaching results, frightened her. Had it been a matter affecting only themselves she would not have hesitated. She knew that things could not remain at the present stage. She must either go on or draw back. And to draw back was impossible. She could not face life without him; he was dearer than life itself.

"It's strange— isn't it?" she said to him once—"to think of oneself as a bad person. I don't feel bad; I feel—just primitive. It's just as though we lived in a world, you and I, and ungoverned by social laws. It seems to me so needlessly distressing that because we love one another we've got to spoil so many lives—to break so much. This is going to make havoc of your life too. You are a big man here; you might have been bigger; but it all comes to the finish when this leaks out. That thought hurts me a good deal."

"It needn's," he returned. "I'm not shaped for greatness, Gerda. I've been lucky. I am lucky still. I could never have achieved greatness. And I don't want it. Life could never give me anything better than your love—it could never give me anything one-half as good."

She did not answer him. She had fallen into a thoughtful reverie, out of which she was abruptly startled by the sound of footsteps approaching along one of the gravelled paths. She became aware of Allerton's stiffened attitude, and, as a faint cry of dis-

may escaped her, she felt his hand upon her lips, and his voice, authoritative and urgent, spoke in her ear.

"Be quiet," he said. "And keep calm. Leave this to me. It will be quite all right."

He stepped quickly aside, and resumed in ordinary conversational tones, which in his own ears sounded horribly forced:

"This corner would serve the purpose; it's nicely sheltered and open to the sun. We haven't room for palms in our place—too many trees about. That is the advantage of a new garden; you can plant what you like."

He broke off and faced about suddenly to confront Wootten, who emerged from behind some hibiscus bushes, and stood peering at him in the gloom.

"Allerton!" he exclaimed, surprised, and held out a cordial hand. "You are a late visitor. I didn't expect to see you—or any one, for that matter."

Allerton took the extended hand, which he dared not ignore, with a feeling of angry shame. The incident struck him as peculiarly painful, and ugly. He refrained from looking at Gerda, who remained like a woman, petrified, silent and still, observing the scene in an apathy of uncomprehending acquiescence.

"Yes; I'm late," he said. "I looked in to know whether you could do with a few palms; and I came upon Mrs. Wootten in the path. She thinks she could find a place for them. Smith sent me down a quantity from Durban. They are rather fine; but we haven't room for them."

He talked for the purpose of giving Gerda time to pull herself together; though while he talked, his explanation of his presence there at that hour sounded

to himself rather feeble. This was the last thing that he had anticipated, that Wootten should come upon them in this sudden manner. He wondered how it was that they had neither of them noticed when the sound of the organ ceased. Immunity from discovery hitherto had led them to grow careless.

If Wootten felt surprise that any one should come solely with the object of offering a present of plants at that time of night, he did not betray the fact. Possibly he saw nothing very unusual in it. In the old days Allerton's visits to himself had happened at unconventional hours. He accepted the explanation without question, and insisted upon Allerton accompanying them to the house for purpose of refreshment.

"You don't visit us too often," he said.

"Well, only for a minute or two."

Allerton wondered whether the reluctance with which he complied with the invitation betrayed itself in his manner. He had never felt so little inclined for a man's company as he felt that night for Wootten's. The man's unconsciousness, his simple cordiality, brought home to him the peculiar vileness of his conduct; it was like a touch on the raw, which made him wince. Stealthily, as they proceeded towards the house, he glanced at Gerda. She walked a little in advance of the two men. He could not see her face; she kept it averted; but he observed the drooping dejection of her air, as she walked with down-bent head along the path in silence.

CHAPTER XXIII

THAT unexpected interruption of their meeting by the intrusion of Wootten upon the scene acted as a check on Allerton's visits. It would not be so easy to explain his presence in the event of a second discovery. Also, disgust at these clandestine meetings was growing in him. He knew that he could not continue living this ugly lie. There was something peculiarly repulsive in the idea of making love to the woman almost before her husband's eyes. It was better far that the blow should fall openly than that he should continue to strike in the dark.

He made his plans deliberately. In a short while his wife would be proceeding to England with the children, whom she was going to place at school. He determined to take advantage of her absence, and persuade Gerda to fly with him. To learn of his flight while she was away from home would be less distressing for his wife. He wanted to spare her as much as possible. It would be a terrible shock for her, in any case; and, in order that she should not have to face it alone, he arranged for Beryl to accompany her to England, and provided the girl, rather shamefacedly, with a handsome cheque for the purpose of buying her trousseau.

Beryl was amazed at his generosity, and delighted with the prospect of the journey. He felt, in face of

her affectionate gratitude, the most contemptible hound alive. He wasn't, after all, doing this to give her pleasure; he was using her for his purpose, and paying her in anticipation of her services: her thanks were in no sense due.

Mrs. Allerton passively acquiesced in the arrangements for their journey. She showed surprise only when he made known his intention of going as far as Cape Town with them. This wholly unexpected attention gave her more real pleasure than she had known for some time. She turned to him with a bright smile when he announced his resolve, and the impulsive exclamation:

"That will be jolly! How nice of you to have thought of that!"

"It's rather much for you," he said, and reddened awkwardly, "transshipping with two kids and a lot of baggage. I'd like to see you comfortably off."

"You'll be sure you're rid of us then," Beryl put in flippantly, with her usual happy knack of inadvertently hitting upon the truth. "Maud is so little inclined to go that I'm not sure she won't turn us all back at the last stage. It's my first voyage home; I don't want to miss it. You are a brick of a brother-in-law, George."

Again Allerton felt himself to be a most unutterable scoundrel. He looked at Beryl's pretty, open countenance, and from her turned his attention to his wife, whose fine face, graver in expression than formerly, and altogether more thoughtful, looked so unsuspecting that his sense of guilt increased and weighed heavily on him. But he had no thought of turning back even then. He could not give up the woman whom, he

loved, loved with a mad recklessness that swept every scruple before it, as the leaves of the trees are carried away and scattered by a wanton wind. It seemed to him that his own life—his happiness and Gerda's—were every whit as important as the happiness of these others, whose lives he was about to spoil. At least Maud and the children. He dwelt on that point persistently. It was not as though she would be utterly alone. And she was still attractive. Quite possibly she would marry again. . . .

They were seated on the stoep, with the litter of the tea-things on a table by Maud Allerton's side. It was Allerton's custom to spend the interval between tea and dinner at the club; but this afternoon he lingered longer than usual, smoking cigarettes and talking fragmentally, chiefly with Beryl; his wife maintained a thoughtful silence, which she broke only occasionally to interpose some remark or to answer a direct question. Anything like spontaneous or sustained conversation between herself and her husband had ceased long ago.

"It is odd," she said once, not looking at either of the others, looking away from them out upon the sunshine flooding the garden hotly in a golden mist which pierced its way between the creepers, and shone, in dappled brightness, upon the silver on the tea-table and on the white stones of the stoep, "what a portentous undertaking this journey seems to me. I've never thought anything of crossing the water before. It's the idea, I suppose, of leaving the children at school that worries me. I hate to think of coming out again without them. It won't be a bit the same—the home, I mean."

"You need not hurry back," Allerton said jerkily.

She turned her head round slowly and looked at him directly. It was possibly the sunlight in her eyes that made them look so bright.

"No," she said. "There is **no need** for haste, of course."

She was silent a moment. Then ~~she~~ she added thoughtfully:

"There's another odd thing I feel about this journey—there's a sense of finality about it. That is absurd, I know, because in a few months I shall be back. But it feels like leaving home permanently. If I were superstitious I should imagine that something were going to happen."

Allerton stood up abruptly, and pitched his cigarette into a rose-bed, where it smouldered in the hot earth, sending a quivering line of blue smoke into the sunny air.

"Something's always happening," he said brusquely. "But if you've got an idea that the ship is going down with you, or anything insane like that, you had better not travel till your nerve recovers."

She laughed quietly.

"Did you ever know me imagine dangers, and funk them in advance?" she asked. "There is nothing wrong with my nerve, George; it is far steadier than yours."

"Between you *my* nerve is getting very wobbly," Beryl interposed plaintively. "I shan't feel confident of my trip until we are on board with not a vestige of land in sight. I'd risk the ship going down rather than not go. Maud has been talking in this strain for weeks. She has a notion that the kids will be

neglected the moment her back is turned. Don't be surprised if we bring them out again."

Allerton lighted a fresh cigarette before answering; when it was well alight, he said, looking at his wife:

"Maud controls that department. Whatever she decides in regard to them is right."

"I expect they will decide this matter for themselves," Beryl interposed. "Most children love school. I know I did. You trust my sagacity, dear boy; we are all going to have a ripping time after we are fairly started."

On the way to the club Allerton congratulated his foresight in having arranged that Beryl should accompany the party. His wife's premonitions had affected him very unpleasantly. There was something uncanny in the accuracy of her forebodings. It was almost as though she suspected something. - He would have believed that she did suspect something of his purpose had he not felt fairly certain that she would have taxed him with it plainly, and not have referred in so vague a manner to what so deeply concerned herself. That was not her way. She was always direct and outspoken. Nor would she have consented to leave home in such circumstances; she would have stayed to make a fight for her rights.

The interval which elapsed before the Allertons' party sailed proved a trying time for all concerned. Allerton hated being alone with his wife for even a brief time; he was uneasy in her presence; he feared to meet her candid eyes; and her gentle forbearance with his taciturnity was a constant reproach. Some queer inconsistency in his nature inclined him to a kindlier feeling towards her than he had experienced

for some time. He recognised once again that quality of companionship which he had always so greatly appreciate in her; and a dull anger with himself gripped him at the thought of the wrong he was about to do her—this woman, who had been his wife and comrade for nearly twelve years. They had known some good times together. He could not determine when first he had ceased to care for her. Possibly there had been no particular period during which this had occurred; the decline of his affection had been going on steadily for years. He wanted something which she had never given him. The even pleasantness of their married life had ceased to satisfy him. He respected her; in a measure he was fond of her still. The thought that soon she would be outside his life completely, disturbed him strangely. But he had no intention of altering anything. He had set the wheels of change revolving, and he put forth no arresting hand to stay their movement. Things had come to a pass where there was no turning back. He was only sorry that by his actions he was going to hurt her. Had she shown greater indifference he would have ceased to trouble himself further about the matter; but he knew that she cared for him still and was grieving over their estrangement.

The last few days were extremely painful for both. The future, to Mrs. Allerton, appeared black and uncertain. When she returned, as, despite her premonitions, she supposed she would return, to her home, leaving the children in England, she knew that it would be to take up a lonelier life than she had yet experienced: the gulf between herself and her husband would have widened in the interval and become im-

passable. She believed that his purpose was to force her recognition of the fact. There were moments when she fancied that he did not wish her to come out again, at least until the children had grown older and could return with her. He did not want her. Her presence manifestly distressed him.

She was immeasurably perplexed what to do for the best. When first she had become aware of the decrease in his affection, she had comforted herself with the reflection that it was a phase that would pass in time, and set herself to ignore it and to treat him with greater consideration. She had done all in her power to win back his kindness. And she had failed. She knew that beyond all doubt. He had grown away from her. There seemed very little hope of any change in the condition of things.

For Allerton the strain of those days immediately preceding their departure was intolerable. Most of the time he passed out of the house. It was a time of fêting and much visiting. There were farewell dinners, which he had to attend with his wife, and evening parties, which he escaped attending whenever possible. One never-to-be-forgotten and insupportable evening was spent at the Woottens'. It was almost too much for his nerve; but to have declined going would have excited comment, and call for explanations which he would have been at a loss to provide.

Wootten had wished for a quiet evening with the Allertons for their only guests; but to Gerda, as to George Allerton, such an arrangement was more than she could face. She had insisted that it would be dull, and decided in favour of a musical party. The music would help matters, and lighten her duties as

hostess. A meeting between George Allerton and herself in the presence of her husband and Mrs. Allerton was an embarrassment she would have avoided had it been possible; but to take no share in the general entertaining would have caused surprise. She decided in favour of the lesser risk, and arranged her party; and Allerton, because he could invent no reasonable excuse, was present at it.

He had no clear idea of the events of that evening; only the awkwardness of their arrival, the constraint of his greeting of the host and hostess, and the subsequent irritation of making himself agreeable to Wootten, who showed a preference for his society which worried him enormously, lived in his memory like a nightmare. He marvelled at the way in which Gerda carried things off: her smiling unconcern was wonderful. No one who saw her moving gaily among her guests would have dreamed of the imminence of the cataclysm that threatened to overwhelm her and make havoc of several lives.

"I must have a word with you before we leave," he said to her once.

And she paused for a moment ~~ere~~ passing on, and answered in equally quiet tones:

"Presently. Go out on the stoep during the next item, and I will come to you."

Then she passed on; and he saw her talking with Beryl and Jack Densham, a beautiful, brilliant figure, with a dash of defiance in the upwarpd tilt of her chin and in the flash of her laughing eyes.

The talk which he had with her later in the garden was necessarily brief and guarded. They had discussed the subject of flight so often that it had come

to be an accepted fact between them even before she gave her actual consent. She had consented, shortly after Wootten's discovery of them together, to go away with him as soon as a convenient opportunity offered; and he had gone into the matter with her then and arranged every detail of their flight, leaving only the date indeterminate. He was to go to Cape Town with his party, and stay there until she joined him. She would leave home quietly, and take the mail train to Cape Town, where he would meet her. Afterwards they would go aboard the mail-boat and sail for England. He undertook to write a letter of explanation to Wootten, which could be posted the last moment before sailing. There would be no fuss and no scene to face. The programme was perfectly simple.

"I shan't see you after to-night until we meet in Cape Town," he said. "You won't fail me, Gerda?"

"I won't fail you," she replied quietly, and clasped her hands together tightly to still their trembling. "Dear, I've missed you so lately. I couldn't go on much longer. . . . Only I wish I hadn't to make the start alone! I'm frightened."

"It's safer so," he said.

"Of course. I know."

"You are sure of yourself, Gerda?" His voice sounded anxious, almost suspicious. "If I thought there was any doubt——"

She interrupted him, speaking in low, tense tones that carried conviction to his ears.

"Will you never learn to depend on me? As sure as the moon shines overhead, and all the stars of heaven look down into this wicked heart of mine, which beats for you alone, I'll keep my promise."

Despite her warning protest, and his knowledge of the danger of such indiscretion, he caught her in his arms and kissed her madly.

CHAPTER XXIV

TWO days later the Allertons embarked for Cape Town, a merry party to all appearances as they came down the jetty amid a crowd of friends, gathered together to see them off and wish them God-speed. Floral gifts were showered upon them. Maud Allerton took her seat in the launch, which rose and fell gently on the lazy swell of the blue, sunlit sea, and sat with her lap filled with flowers, and baskets of flowers on the seat beside her, smiling bravely up at the laughing crowd on the steps, with just a hint of sadness in her eyes now that the moment of departure had arrived. These friendly faces were a part of the old life, the life which she seemed to be leaving behind her for ever. The sense of finality, of leaving her home for an indefinite period, never perhaps to return to it, gripped her strongly. She tried to shake off the feeling, telling herself that it was absurd; but it returned and held her tormentingly.

She turned her attention to the children, standing near her, excited and eager, holding boxes of chocolates, which Mr. Fielding had given them, clutched tightly in their hands. From them she looked at Beryl, seated beside Jack Densham, who was going on board with them to see the last of her—Beryl, joyously happy, engrossed with her own affairs, and wholly unconscious of the trouble her sister concealed so jeal-

ously—from her as well as from the rest of the world. Lastly she looked at her husband; and she detected in his face some of the doubt and worry she fancied must be noticeable in hers.

Her attention was caught away from these observations by some one speaking down to her from the steps. She looked up to answer, and waved in response to the waving of hats and handkerchiefs as the launch cast loose and steamed away from the jetty. She smiled and waved to the last moment; then, with a lump in her throat, she lifted the flowers which she held to her face and hid in their sweetness the tears that were shining in her eyes.

During the journey to Cape Town Mrs. Allerton was too fully occupied with the children to find leisure for reflection. It was the first time she had travelled with them without a maid, and she found the business of looking after them no light undertaking. Beryl was willing to take her share in this; but she would not allow the girl to devote herself to them; she wanted her to have a good time. And the care of the children proved a relief. Their presence lessened the strain and embarrassment she was conscious of feeling always now in her husband's company.

Allerton was attentive and helpful during the journey, and amazingly considerate for his wife's comfort. He was more like his former self than she remembered him to have been for a long time: he was a source of constant wonderment to her. There were moments when she believed that he was trying to get back to the old footing; and then, when her hope ran highest, the new reserve would fall upon him, and the distances between them would reassert themselves.

She ceased to speculate about it, and accepted his kindnesses in the spirit in which they were tendered, and looked for nothing more.

At Cape Town they transhipped to the intermediate steamer, which, being less crowded than the mail-boat, was more convenient when travelling with children. Allerton went on board and settled them in, and made every arrangement for their comfort during the voyage. He felt nervous and awkward as the moment for parting drew near. His wife accompanied him down to the cabin, and, standing facing him in the confined space, placed her two hands on his shoulders and looked steadily into his reluctant eyes. He forced himself to meet her gaze; but it cost a tremendous effort of will to prevent his eyes from wandering to the port-hole—anywhere, rather than meet hers.

“I want to say good-bye to you here, old man—not on deck,” she said. “We have always avoided public demonstration. And there’s something I want to say. . . . It has been a long-standing arrangement that I should go home this year to place the children at school; but I think when we first discussed it I believed that, if you didn’t come with us, you would follow and join me in England. I’ve given up that hope. I’ve come to see that it is not always wise for a man—for you, at any rate—to be tied to his family. You’ve grown restive of late. You are just a little fed up with us all.”

She smiled wistfully, and the hands on his shoulders pressed more heavily. He felt himself changing colour. There was a dryness in his throat due to excessive nervousness. He hated this kind of scene. He had been dreading something of the sort and bracing

himself to meet it; but, despite his preparedness, he felt horribly at a loss and inadequate. He put his hands over hers, with some purpose in his mind of removing hers; but he did not remove them. He remained still, facing her quietly, while he strove after self-control. It was difficult, he found, to say anything. There was nothing to say that would not add to her distress. To make light of what she uttered with such evident pain in voice and eyes were to injure her further; to deny it was impossible. He remained silent.

"I don't want to worry you," she said. "I am not reproaching you. God knows how this thing has happened. It is not of your seeking, I am sure. We are as our temperaments shape us. But I want you to know that I love you still. I'll always love you, I believe, however indifferent you grow. One day you may come to need me again. If that ever happens, I shall be ready to come to you. I'll know quite surely when you want me. In the meantime I'm not going to bother you. I shall stay in England until you fetch me out. The only request I have to make is that you won't, out of pity, make pretense of affection which you don't feel, and so bring me back to this life, which was becoming intolerable for both of us. I ask you only to be honest with me."

"Maud, I'm awfully sorry," he muttered, and, despite his utmost effort, his eyes refused to return her gaze. "I'm a brute. I don't deserve your love. You are a brick to behave to me like this."

He removed her hands from his shoulders and turned aside.

"I didn't know," he said, "that you felt like this.

I've scarcely realised myself all you've put before me. I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing," she advised. "I think I understand—not a great deal, perhaps, but something. We'll carry on and hope for brighter things."

He turned his head and looked at her sharply. What did she understand? Her clear eyes settled his doubt. Whatever she thought, she had no suspicion of his unfaithfulness. With an embarrassed flush, he held out his hand.

"I'm sorry, Maud," he said.

She put her hand into his and drew him to her and kissed him.

Allerton went on deck alone. He had left his wife in the cabin, dry-eyed and outwardly calm; but he knew, as certainly as though he had witnessed the storm of grief which followed his exit from the cabin, when, throwing herself upon the settee, her unnatural control broke down, that this control was assumed to deceive him while he remained with her. He felt unutterable contempt for himself. Even his love for Gerda suffered temporary eclipse at the thought of his wife alone in her sorrow, and the memory of the love for him which lit her eyes when they parted. The contemplation of the blow which he was about to deal her was horrible in face of her kindness and steadfast trust.

He made his way towards Beryl, who stood by the rail with the children, watching the people descend the gangway on to the quay. He walked like a man in a dream. There was a stunned expression on his face, and a look of furtive shame in his eyes.

Beryl turned to him, and, a little surprised by his appearance, sought to hearten him.

"Cheer up, George!" she said. "It isn't permanent widowerhood for you. I'll look after them all right."

"Look after Maud, and cheer her up," he said, kissing her. "She's hipped."

Beryl nodded.

"I know. I felt a bit sick, saying good-bye to Jack. Don't you worry. We'll get over these little troubles."

"You're a good sort, dear," he said. "I trust her with you. Stick close, Beryl; she'll need you, perhaps."

He fancied he detected a question in her surprised eyes, and turned and caught up the children and kissed them. He displayed greater affection for them than was customary with him, and joked with them about school life and the knowledge they were about to acquire. There was no sadness in this parting.

"Hurry up, Daddy," they entreated him. "We want to see you go down the gangway."

He laughed, and glanced at Beryl, who remained observing him with unusual attentiveness and a look of growing curiosity in her eyes.

"They are keen to see the last of me," he said. "Nice, affectionate daughters!"

"Poor old George!" his sister-in-law mused, as she watched him leave the ship and turn to wave to them from the quay among the crowd gathered there to see the vessel get under way. "I never knew he cared so much."

She blew him a kiss from the deck; and a young man, standing near to him, appropriated the courtesy and smilingly returned it.

"Isn't it funny, Auntie," one of her small nieces

remarked, as the vessel moved slowly from its berth and the quay appeared steadily to recede, while the expanse of blue water widened between it and the ship, "to see how little Daddy looks? He's getting tinier and tinier."

"That's because he's feeling lonely," Beryl said, and felt suddenly rather lonely herself.

This farewell to the last of the land held a sense of utter desolation, emphasized by the waste of waters which, blue and dazzling in the sunshine, seemed to close about them, and, stretching away in all directions, met and melted into the pale line of the horizon. Ahead was only blue sea; astern was the sun-bathed shore, with the great mountain towering over the city, and the figures on the quay no longer visible. The Cape of Good Hope, which is also the Cape of Storms, was fading in the golden haze which overhung land and sea.

BOOK IV: FLIGHT

"Nothing can work me damage except myself; the harm that I sustain, I carry about with me, and never am a sufferer but by my own fault."

ST. BERNARD.

BOOK IV: FLIGHT

CHAPTER XXV

THE blow fell a fortnight after the Allertons' departure. It struck first at Wootten, and it struck hard. The man was so entirely unprepared for the calamity which overtook him, with the suddenness and unexpectedness of a tidal wave which sweeps all before it in its relentless advance, that he did not realise immediately with the discovery of her flight the real nature of his wife's desperate step.

She had left a note for him; but it was brief, and explained nothing beyond the fact that she had left her home and him for ever, and expressed the hope that he would not waste a single regretful thought upon one who was so little worthy of his generous kindness. She stated neither her destination nor that she had a companion in her flight; and during the first stunned hours of discovery the suspicion that she had not gone alone never entered his thoughts.

He sat alone in his deserted home, leaning forward in his seat, with his hands between his knees, the note Gerda had left for him gripped in them, his gaze fixed upon the carpet, his features tense. He remained thus for hours and forgot the time.

Mrs. Martin was the first to invade his solitude.

She came to inquire at what hour Mrs. Wootten was expected to return. Wootten's haggard eyes, when he lifted his gaze from the carpet to answer the question, frightened her. She remained in the doorway, staring at him, much as she might have stared had she been abruptly confronted with a stranger in place of the man whom she had served faithfully for years—a stranger who usurped his place and aped his dress and bearing.

"She is not returning. I thought she would have told you," he answered in harsh, unfamiliar tones. "She has gone home to her mother."

Mrs. Martin withdrew silently and swiftly, and closed the door behind her without noise—closed it upon the familiar, yet unfamiliar, figure, closed it upon the haggard eyes which frightened her, closed it upon the tragedy which she recognised without understanding its nature, and upon the broken heart of the man within the room.

"She has gone home to her mother."

The words had come without premeditation from Wootten's pallid lips, had appeared to come without his volition. Even as he uttered them, he found himself wondering what had prompted this explanation of his wife's absence. Finally he decided that it was possibly the true explanation, and that some subconscious knowledge within himself was responsible for the framing of it in the words he had used. She had left him because she did not love him and was not happy with him: naturally she would return to her mother.

Wootten allowed himself twenty-four hours' quiet reflection before making up his mind as to the course

he would pursue. It was difficult to know how to act without giving rise to talk, and he was loyally anxious to avoid any scandal in connection with his wife's name. The futile wish that she had trusted him sufficiently to confide this trouble to him and discuss it with him found a place in his thoughts. He would have tried to understand. And he would have arranged her departure in a way that would have silenced criticism. Had he realised the urgency of her desire to leave him, he would not have sought to prevent her. Her want of trust in him added to the blow she had dealt him by her desperate and precipitate act.

And then came the first doubts as to the innocent nature of her flight. Casually the information came to him, from a man who had been on the station platform at the time of the departure of the mail train, that his wife had been seen entraining for Cape Town in Trevor's company. Possibly his informant had wondered why Wootten had not been present to see her off; but, if he had any suspicion of the truth, Wootten's manner of receiving the communication baffled him in its quiet acceptance of what, to the other man, had seemed decidedly odd.

But, though he received this intelligence as though it were not news to him, Wootten was staggered. A new dread gripped him. This report of Gerda being in the company of the man he distrusted pointed, as it seemed to him, conclusively to one thing. He believed that Trevor had enticed her away from her home.

Instead of going to the office as usual he returned to the house, stricken to the soul, and uncertain what

to do for the best. He had thoughts of going to Cape Town after her, of finding her, and saving her from the man's evil influence. When he had achieved this, he would take her to England and place her in her mother's charge and leave her. He had no hope, no wish, to induce her to return with him. She had killed his belief in her.

Thinking of her in the new and ugly light which this revelation had seemed to throw upon her conduct, he felt his love for her shaken to its foundations. He had esteemed her in the past not only as a beautiful woman, but as a woman with a beautiful soul. He believed that he had been deceived as to her quality. She was heartless and selfish, as he had heard her so often describe herself. She was, after all, the better judge of her own nature. The sweetness and charm of her were superficial virtues.

And then suddenly he gave way. He leaned forward over the writing-table before which he sat, with his arms upon it and his haggard face dropped on them, in a dumb misery of grief.

The final blow had yet to fall. As though some implacable fate took wanton pleasure in racking this man to the limit of human endurance, the last blow was the cruellest of all; and it fell when the man was already suffering so acutely that it would seem impossible that he could suffer more. It lacerated every raw and bleeding nerve afresh, and left him for the time with a shaken faith in human nature and a sense of bitter resentment against the whole world.

The further blow came in the form of the letter which Allerton wrote and posted from Cape Town. It told Wootten, among other things, that the man and

woman who had so deeply wronged him had left Africa.

That he had misjudged Trevor scarcely touched him in this new and yet more crushing sorrow. Trevor's meeting with his wife had been accidental and unwished-for on her side. He had gone to Cape Town on a brief holiday, and had travelled in the same train. Wootten learned that later, but it was of no moment. The thing which hit him, so that it dwarfed every other consideration, was that his own friend had done this vile thing, had misused the confidence reposed in him, and taken advantage of the privileges of friendship to steal his wife's affection and dishonour his home.

Many incidents recurred to him in damning proof of this treachery, incidents which, in his absolute faith in the woman whom he had married and in the man who was his friend, had seemed to him at the time of their happening trivial and natural enough: with his understanding enlightened as to the evil of their guilty intercourse, he wondered how he could have been so blind while the thing developed before his eyes. He had never doubted Allerton; he had liked and trusted the man; and Gerda he had held above suspicion in his thoughts. They had failed him, these two whom he had trusted most; and for the time he became embittered; his faith in the honesty of purpose of any individual suffered eclipse. The sweetness of the man's disposition was not proof against the shock it had sustained. He was wounded in his deepest feelings, and the wound festered, and infected his whole nature with the insidious poison of mistrust.

He cursed the man in his heart for his vile duplicity,

for the lying friendship he had offered, while he sought to cheat the man he pretended friendship with and rob him of his most sacred possession. He had come like a common thief, this adulterer, and rifled his home of the most valued possession it enshrined. The woman whom he had loved had broken his heart; it remained for the man whom he had trusted to harden the fragments to flint.

Wootten placed the case in the hands of his solicitors and instructed them to open divorce proceedings without delay. Allerton had asked him in his letter to do so, stating that it was his intention to marry Gerda as soon as they had each secured the necessary freedom; but Wootten, in his new distrust of the man's integrity, placed no reliance on this promise; he instructed his lawyers to obtain heavy damages, to be settled upon the woman to secure her independence.

That done, he removed his few personal belongings back to the Cottage, and returned to the little house in Park Lane, with Mrs. Martin and a couple of houseboys as his entire staff. The other servants were paid off and dismissed; and the new house, which had been Gerda's toy, was deserted, the blinds drawn before the windows, as in a house of mourning, and the gates leading into the garden heavily padlocked. Wootten kept the keys locked away in his safe. No one was allowed to enter the place. He never went near it himself. The garden which Gerda had planned with such pride remained untended. Everything was allowed to fall into a state of disorder and neglect.

People wondered about the house and about the owner, but no one questioned him. Whatever sympathy was felt for him in his trouble never found expression.

He neither invited nor encouraged sympathy. The tragedy of Wootten's sorrow was endured alone.

His wife's name did not pass his lips. Long afterwards Mrs. Martin learned the facts of Gerda's flight. Wootten told her nothing more than he had told her on the first night. He gave no explanation to any one. He simply went back to the old life, and lived as though the past year had existed in the minds of himself and others as a dream exists, as unsubstantial and as evanescent. He cut it out entirely, and settled back to the dull routine of a life that had lost its illusions and its simple content. He had dreamed his dream and had awoke to the bleak reality of a friendless and loveless world, through which he walked in a chill, grey twilight, without hope and with none of the old trust in human nature which had formerly companioned his lonely days. His world was emptier and darker with the passing of his dream.

CHAPTER XXVI

ALLERTON and Gerda travelled to England as man and wife. They made use of a fictitious name on the journey, a thin disguise, since to more than one person on the ship it was known perfectly who Allerton was. He was too widely known in South Africa to hope to escape recognition.

It is doubtful whether this fact troubled him greatly. The plunge once taken he did not concern himself particularly with results; he was satisfied to leave the machinery which he had set in motion to fashion events; the difficulties could be negotiated as they presented themselves. It did not concern him who knew that the beautiful woman with him was not his wife in the accepted sense. She had given herself to him, trusting him blindly; and he intended to stick by her whatever happened. She meant more to him than all the world of dull men and women whom he had ever known.

Gerda, on the other hand, was sensitive in respect of public opinion. She shrank from the criticism she imagined she read in the glances of her fellow-passengers. On her voyage to Africa, as Wootten's wife, she had been the centre of attraction, had enjoyed an immense popularity; on this occasion she avoided the other passengers even more persistently than they avoided her. She sat apart with Allerton in a seclu-

sion which, despite the limited space on deck, was never invaded by the rest. She was getting a first taste of the world's estimate of those who flagrantly defy its rules. And it hurt. However great love may be it suffers under humiliation.

"They know, those people," she said to Allerton one day, while they sat together looking out over the glassy surface of the sea. "When I meet their eyes I see the knowledge in them. They are thinking all the while, 'That is a bad woman.' It's what I am—and yet I don't feel wicked."

"What does it matter what any one thinks?" he said, and put out a hand and laid it strongly over hers. "You are the sweetest woman in the world, Gerda, and the best—to me. I don't see why you need bother about these matters."

"It hurts," she answered simply, "when I see them evading my glance. And the men look at me—— Oh, you know! . . . If you weren't beside me always I should feel afraid."

"If I catch any one looking at you," he returned grimly, "I'll make him wish he hadn't. Don't be fanciful, dear. It's morbid to feel like that. It will be different when we reach the other side."

She squeezed his hand and smiled up at him without answering.

"What does anything matter so long as we are together?" he said. "We've both got to face something—give up something. You can't have a thing in this life that's worth having without sacrificing something to obtain it. It's worth it—to me—worth all the sacrifices we shall be called upon to make."

These past days alone with you have been heaven. I don't want anything more."

"But you will," she said. "My dear, no woman's love ever entirely satisfies a man."

"Does love entirely satisfy a woman?" he asked.

"I don't know. It might—some women."

"But not you?" he persisted, his glance meeting hers.

"No."

Her eyes wore a reflective look, and her face was grave and intent. If her admission disappointed him he did not show it. He gripped her hand tighter, and studied the pensive beauty of her expression as she leaned back in her deck-chair with her face towards him.

"I don't think I could become ever so completely absorbed in the mere act of loving and being loved in return to find it all-sufficient. Life holds so many interests. Love is the greatest of these; but the rest count for something. Don't think I am undervaluing our love. It's the best thing life has given me. I chose it deliberately in preference to honour and the world's good opinion. I know what I've lost in choosing it; but, if I could go back now, and wipe out all that has happened, I wouldn't do it. I'd rather remain with you, dear, and forfeit the rest."

She sat up straighter, and watched for a while a pair of gulls circling over the ship.

"They know freedom," she said—"freedom of choice and selection. It is only human beings who are fettered and hedged about by rules. We daren't be true to our instincts."

"Some of us dare," he returned.

Gerda smiled suddenly.

"Some of us dare," she admitted. "But we have to pay for our daring. Do you know what I am always thinking—even when you sit down beside me, and we talk of other things? I think of my mother, happy in her little home in Essex, unconscious that I am on my way to England, secure in her belief of my imaginary happiness. I've always let her think that I was happy. And now I am going to her to spoil her dream."

Allerton shifted uneasily in his seat. He felt in his pocket for his cigarette-case and selected a cigarette and lighted it, frowning thoughtfully the while. He wished she had not started him on this tack. He was unpleasantly disturbed himself continually with the thought of the letter that had yet to be written to his wife—the letter which would be her first intimation of his desertion of her.

He blew a little cloud of smoke into the air before answering her.

"It isn't any use to dwell on these things, dear," he said. "Fretting won't remedy them. I expect she'll understand. In any case, it's too late now to funk the fences. We knew what we were in for from the start. If you're afraid to face her, don't go home."

"It isn't that I'm afraid," she answered. "But it gives me a sore heart when I think of her."

She leaned towards him and rested her head against his shoulder, as though she sought comfort from the contact; and he put his arm about her and held her close.

"Don't worry, sweetheart," he said. "The clouds look blacker than they are. We shall get through all

right. Don't spoil our honeymoon, Gerda, with regrets."

"I'm not regretting anything," she said, and pulled his hand nearer to her lips and kissed it. "I'm only sorry that our happiness means unhappiness for others. It's so good in itself, my dear. I never dreamed how splendid love could be. It has melted all the hardness in my heart. It makes me feel—just good. When I look back—only a little way back—and recall all the selfish, bitter thoughts that warped my mind, I am amazed at the change your love has wrought so quickly. I am filled with love for all the world—this world which shrinks from me. There is a new colour in the sea, a new quality in the sunshine; everything is just a little sweeter, a little better, because you love me. Whatever happens to me in the future I shall be a better woman for having loved you. And so you see, dear, I have nothing to regret—I don't regret—anything."

Whatever doubts or fears Gerda felt in regard to the future she kept to herself after that day. She knew that Allerton was troubled about his wife. In a measure she also felt remorse when she dwelt on the distressing nature of the shock Maud Allerton would receive when she learnt the truth. Oddly, she had liked Mrs. Allerton; she liked her still. In different circumstances they might have been good friends. The knowledge that the sorrow that must overwhelm this woman shortly was of her making, troubled her. It grieved her to reflect that she would make a bitter enemy of one whom she esteemed. She felt ashamed when she thought of Maud. But she never thought of her as caring greatly for her hus-

band: Allerton's indifference had seemed to her to reflect his wife's feeling for him. She had never displayed any deep affection for him. In the warm impulsiveness of her own nature, Gerda failed to understand the other woman's more reserved disposition. She had thought her cold and unsympathetic. The steadfastness of Maud's love for her husband was a factor she never suspected and never took into account.

Allerton was aware of it, however, and it made the writing of his letter to her a difficult and painful undertaking. He put off the writing of it until after they reached England. But soon after getting ashore, with the knowledge that she might hear from others the news which should come to her first through him hanging over him, he hardened himself to the task of writing and despatching the letter.

It was the most difficult letter which he had ever had to compose, and while he wrote it his mind was filled with kindly thoughts of her, which obtruded themselves upon his notice to the exclusion of the matter in hand. The pleasant, careless years unrolled themselves before him in mental review, as he sat, pen in hand, with the blank sheet of paper spread open on the blotting-pad in front of him. Their life together had been happy in an unexciting way. There had never been any magic for him in their intercourse, as there was in his love for Gerda; but she had been necessary to him once. He had known a quiet content with her which he supposed he would never know again. She had given him more than he had given her; he had realised that; he had realised it even without the assurance of her undying love which she had ex-

pressed at parting. His desertion of her was as vile an act as any one could be guilty of; there was no justification for it in the smallest sense. And she would take it hardly. Despite her realisation of the diminution in his affection for her, she was wholly unprepared, he believed, for the blow which his letter would deal her.

He hated writing the letter, but it had to be. Half a dozen times he began it, reached a certain point, and, dissatisfied with what he had written, tore up the sheet of paper and started afresh.

Finally it was finished. He threw down the pen and sat back, staring through the window out at the fine October rain that was falling steadily with the dull, grey persistence of a sky that was furtively weeping in accompaniment to his thoughts. The letter lay open before him, and his hand rested upon it in apparent indecision whether to tear up this effort also, or place it in the envelope addressed and stamped ready to receive it.

The contents of the letter were as follows:

“DEAR MAUD,

“You will be surprised to see on receiving this that I am in England. I landed a few days ago from the *Armada*. I hardly know how to tell you what I must tell you. This letter is distressing for me to write; it will be, I know, distressing and painful for you to read. I did not travel to England alone. Gerda Wootten accompanied me. We are staying here together.

“I don’t know how much you guessed during the past months when you realised the change in me—

not the whole of the truth, I think. I am sorry about this, Maud, more sorry than words can express. I don't know how it happened—what began it exactly. I've loved her almost from the first. We both of us put up a fight, but it wasn't any use. There's no explaining the thing—it just happened. I am sorry only on your account.

“Gerda and I mean to stick together. Wootten, of course, will divorce her. I am furnishing my solicitor with the necessary evidence to enable you to secure your freedom, and will put him in communication with you. I hate the thought of all this for you, but there is nothing else for it now. To ask your forgiveness were to solicit what I do not deserve, and what I could not expect even of your generosity.

“GEORGE.”

Abruptly Allerton took up the letter, folded it, and put it in its envelope; then, not trusting it to other hands, he went out into the rain and dropped it into the nearest letter-box.

He turned away from the letter-box with a feeling of relief. The thing was done past recall. It only remained to him now to await her answer. He knew her well enough to feel assured that she would answer his letter, would possibly demand further explanation before taking any definite step.

This, to him, was the ugliest part of the whole business; but it had to be gone through with before he could give the woman who had sacrificed everything for him the protection of his name.

CHAPTER XXVII

WITH the imminence of his wife's expected letter hanging over him, Allerton took Gerda to Loughton to see her mother.

He drove with her from the station to the little house which Wootten's bounty enabled her to live in in comfort, and left her at the gate with the understanding that he would return for her in time to catch their train back to town.

He had attempted to dissuade Gerda from making this visit, had suggested the advisability of writing instead and waiting until her mother expressed a desire to see her. These family obligations worried him: he resented the necessity for explaining anything. But Gerda remained fixed in her resolve. The shock of her news would be less painful if she told it than if it reached her mother through any other channel.

"She is such a gentle, loving little mother," she said "I've never hurt her in any way before."

He kissed her at the gate, and left her, feeling anxious and perturbed on her account. He wondered whether other people who took the step which they had taken had the same unpleasantnesses to contend with before they were allowed to slip unobtrusively away and forget these difficulties in the joy of uninterrupted possession. Things ought to be simpler, he felt.

"Damn!" he muttered, and kicked at a stone in the path in sudden irritation.

He did not know what to do with himself while he waited for the time to pass. He mooned about and smoked, with his thoughts for company—harassing thoughts which he could not rid himself of, as he trudged on endlessly along damp, unfrequented roads, with the autumn leaves falling limply, and lying in sodden heaps upon the ground.

He thought of Gerda, and pictured her meeting with her mother, and wondered what her mother would think of, and say about him. She would be very bitter, he supposed, against him for the part he had played in her daughter's life. That, of course, was natural, and only to be expected; but it chafed him none the less because he knew it to be deserved.

This break-up of two homes was his doing. Gerda was so much younger, so little experienced in life; the responsibility for their action lay with him.

Mrs. Kitson, Gerda's mother, formed the same opinion, while she listened in distressful dismay to her daughter's halting confession. Nothing that had ever befallen her—and she was not unacquainted with trouble—had grieved and shocked her in the same degree as this miserable story of unfaithfulness and guilty love which her own child poured in her ears, seated on the hearth-rug at her feet, holding her poor, trembling hands in her own warm clasp, and wiping away the heavy tears that splashed upon them against her fresh young face.

"To leave that good man! To hurt him like that! He is one of the best, Gerda," she said. "I expect you have broken his heart."

"I know," Gerda said. "I am always thinking of these things. But life with him was unbearable. His kindness even. . . . Oh, if you knew what it feels like to live like that with some one you do not love—taking everything and giving nothing! Married life without love is a nightmare. One ought not to marry unless one loves."

"I believed you did love Fred," Mrs. Kitson urged.

Gerda buried her face in the speaker's lap to hide its emotion.

"I never loved him," she confessed. "But I thought I could be happy with him; and it seemed to me at the time the best thing to do. It was all a mistake, little mother. When I met George I knew what love was. If you knew him you would understand. He's not in the least what you're thinking him. I want you to know him. Will you see him, dear, when he calls for me?"

"No," Mrs. Kitson answered, her voice breaking with the sorrow of it all. "I can't meet the man who has ruined your life, my Gerda." She bent over the crouching figure at her feet, and her tears fell softly on the bright hair. "My little girl!" she sobbed. "My little girl!"

They remained so for a while in silence, a bitter silence, broken only by the sound of grief made audible in the older woman's quiet weeping and Gerda's deep, infrequent sobs.

The girl raised her face presently from its resting-place and put her arms about her mother and clung closely to her.

"I love him so!" she whispered. "He's all the world to me."

"And his wife and children?" Mrs. Kitson said. "Oh, my Gerda! have you no thought for them?"

"It's too late to think of these things now," Gerda replied, with a faint show of defiance in her manner.

Her mother drew a deep breath, and looked into the beautiful, tear-stained face that was dearer in her eyes than any other face, and fairer. It was almost like looking into the face of a stranger: the mind which lay behind its fairness was beyond her understanding. Two years ago she would have said she knew its inmost thought; but life had been busy with its development since then, and the subtle complexities of love and passion had changed and marred its freshness.

"You are sacrificing every one to your happiness—you and the man you love," she said. "It's not like you. I see his influence in that."

"You are unjust to him," Gerda insisted. "We didn't arrive at our decision without a struggle. . . . But what's the good of talking about it? We loved. We couldn't help what happened. I've been more worried on your account than for any other reason. I knew that I must hurt you. That troubled me."

"You've hurt others more. You've hurt yourself more. When you realise how badly you have hurt yourself, remember that your mother's love remains unaltered, and come home to me."

The depressing effect of this visit, the sorrow of their hasty parting, when the sound of Allerton's ring caused Gerda to start to her feet with a conscious flush and fling herself into her mother's arms for a last tearful embrace before she left her, sitting sad and broken before the flaring logs upon the hearth,

was very evident to the jealous eyes of the man upon the doorstep, who glanced keenly at her when she appeared, and taking her hand, and drawing it through his arm, led her, without speaking, down the little path to the gate, which he opened and shut behind them. No need for him to ask how things had gone; her face told him what stresses she had been through. He put her into the waiting cab, and when it had started drew her to him and kissed her.

"We've had enough of this sort of thing, Gerda," he said. "Thank God we leave it all shortly and cut across the Channel!"

She answered nothing, but leaned against him, weeping bitterly.

The morrow brought a fresh development in the form of a telegram from Maud Allerton. It arrived in time to prevent Allerton, if he wished, from leaving England; and when he received it he remained for a while undecided whether to obey its summons or follow out the programme he was pledged to with Gerda.

She came into their private sitting-room while he deliberated this matter, dressed ready for the street, and discovered him standing at the window with the telegram in his hand. He faced round at her entry, and held the form out to her with the laconic information:

"A wire from Maud."

She took it and read the message slowly: "I must talk with you. Come and see me. Maud." Deliberately she crumpled the flimsy paper in her hand and looked up at him.

"She means to fight," she said.

"I don't know." His eyes were sombre. "Perhaps she does. I don't think I shall go."

There followed a long pause. Allerton turned back again to the window, and remained looking out on the traffic while he revolved this point in his mind. Why should he go and face further unpleasantness? No amount of talking could alter things; it would be merely distressing for both of them.

"Come here," he said.

Quietly she joined him at the window and stood beside him, looking out upon the busy street, noticing things and people in a disconnected, preoccupied manner. She was thinking about Maud Allerton, wondering what it was she so urgently wanted to say. In the back of her mind an idea took shape that Allerton ought to see her, ought to give her an opportunity of expressing herself. It seemed unfair and a little cowardly to refuse her request.

"You'll go?" she said.

"I don't know. Why should I? Why doesn't she see her solicitor and be done with it? I don't want to see her."

"Why not?"

He looked down at her, surprised.

"If you enjoy scenes, I don't," he said; and regretted having said that at the sight of the sadness in her eyes. "She wants to attempt the impossible, sweetheart," he added, and smiled down at her with infinite tenderness in his look. "If heaven and hell and all the angels sought to separate us now, they wouldn't succeed. I love your little finger, every hair on your dear head, better than I love, or have ever loved, any one. You are my first considera-

tion, Gerda, my sole consideration. After all, Maud has the children. No; I don't think I'll go. We'll keep to the original arrangement, and I'll write instead."

But Allerton did not write. He discovered, when it came to the point, that he could not find any good reason to urge for disregarding her request; he resorted therefore to the same medium which she had employed, and despatched a telegram to her at Cheltenham, which stated briefly: "Crossing Channel. Communicate with me through my lawyer."

That finally disposed of the matter so far as he was concerned. He meant to have no other postal address during the next few months. They would be moving about. He did not want to be troubled with letters either for Gerda or himself. Freedom from worry was what she needed; and he was determined that she should have it.

"You must leave every care behind you, dear," he said, when he took her aboard the packet at Dover. "We are going to forget everything that ever happened and start afresh."

"I am going to forget everything and everybody—yourself included—in a few minutes, when this old boat begins to bob about," she answered with a rueful laugh. She squeezed his arm affectionately. "It's so good, dear, to get away from it all, and be alone with you. No one knows anything about us here; no one on the other side will know. We'll be just like any other married couple over there. My dear, I am so glad!"

She pulled him down on the narrow berth beside her, and hugged him closely.

"I've hated all the furtiveness," she said. "I've never felt till now that you were wholly mine. I've wanted to walk proudly beside you and look the world in the face; and I couldn't. I felt that every one, the veriest stranger, knew all about me. It's going to be so different now. This dreary England—I'm glad we are leaving it behind."

"You need never return unless you wish. We'll live in Italy among the vineyards and mountains and blue skies, if you like. You are my world, Gerda. I ask nothing more of life than just to be with you."

"Just for a time, my boy," she answered. "I wouldn't have that content you for always. You've your work. This is our play-time. We'll make the most of it, and be happy while it lasts."

"Are you happy, Gerda" he asked.

"When I shut my mind against every thought that troubles it, when I cease to remember those whom we have made unhappy—when I lie in your arms and forget all these sad old things, and my heart and my brain are filled with you only, then I am happy beyond telling."

An answer which, had he interpreted it rightly, was tantamount to an admission that she could never know complete happiness in their love. Love bought at so great a price brings endless regrets. But Allerton was satisfied. His arms enfolded her in a close embrace.

CHAPTER XXVIII

STIMULATED by blue skies and fair, sunny days in that incomparable city, Paris, with its wide, splendid avenues, its gay crowds of pleasure-loving, kindly people, with their air of unconcern and unsuspecting indifference to what lies beneath the agreeable surface of things, the fever of love gripped Allerton and Gerda anew. All that had been painful and furtive in their intercourse was forgotten here. They were lovers enjoying their honeymoon in all the pride and glad satisfaction of ownership. They had the appearance of newly-married people; and the Parisian mind, which inclines kindly towards lovers, took a sympathetic interest in their joy, and looked with favour on the big, good-looking Englishman and his beautiful young wife. The Englishman was wealthy, and spent his money freely, and madame was very sweet and gracious.

People staying at the hotel made friendly overtures to Gerda; and, after a week of taking their meals in a private room, Gerda suggested joining the table-d'hôte, and with her appearance in public speedily gathered a little court about her, which at first amused Allerton, until he became a little jealous of her popularity. He had no use for these people, and they monopolised Gerda. And the men paid her greater attention than he altogether liked. Had he but known

it, he was repeating the experience through which Wootten had passed during his brief honeymoon. Gerda made friends easily. She enjoyed popularity, and fresh faces attracted her.

It was during the third week of their stay that something happened to put an end to this pleasant sense of security—something altogether unforeseen, yet so likely to occur in Paris that Allerton blamed his indiscretion in not thinking of its possibility and taking due precautions to guard against it. A man whom he knew quite intimately ran into him as he was leaving his hotel one morning, and stopped and accosted him in pleased surprise.

It was a moment of immense embarrassment for Allerton, in which he was acutely conscious of a feeling of relief that Gerda was not with him. She had gone out earlier shopping under the auspices of a little Frenchwoman who had offered her assistance as interpreter. He was on his way to meet them in the Rue de la Paix when the undesired encounter took place.

"Allerton! by all that's surprising!" the other man exclaimed, and thrust forward an eager hand. "Man, I thought you were thousands of miles away! What are you doing here?"

"Oh, just looking round—on holiday."

"Lucky devil! Your life is mostly holiday. Is Mrs. Allerton with you?"

"She's in England—Cheltenham—with her sister and the kids."

"And you are kicking up your heels here—on the loose? Well, I'm glad I met you. Let's fix up something to do together. Are you free to-night?"

From the moment of meeting this man Allerton had known that some such suggestion would follow. He was prepared with an answer.

"Sorry," he said; "but I'm leaving to-day."

"Couldn't stay over till to-morrow, I suppose?"

"That's out of the question, I'm afraid."

He was aware, even while he spoke, that his listener appreciated his reason for finding his company inconvenient. There was a look of understanding in the eyes which met his with a hint of curiosity, not unmixed with envy, in their expression, which he resented intensely. Of all the people whom he knew this man was about the last he would have desired to meet under existing circumstances. Ordinarily, as a boon companion on a holiday, he was excellent company; but his discretion was not to be trusted; and Allerton had no wish for his affairs to become common talk for the clubs.

After a further interchange of remarks, they separated, with a certain constraint perceptible in the manner of each, and a decrease in the other man's cordiality. Allerton hailed a taxi as the speediest and surest means of getting rid of his unwelcome acquaintance, and jumped in, consigning the man, whom last he had met in Johannesburg, to a yet more remote and hotter destination, as he leaned back in his seat and reflected on the urgent necessity for leaving Paris.

This fleeing from place to place for the purpose of avoiding recognition was not at all to his taste. He wondered why he did it—why he didn't stay and face things out. The thing would be known soon enough. It was known already in South Africa. His name

would be held in execration out there. He could hear them in imagination talking him over at the club—the man who had deserted his wife and stolen the wife of his friend. He could fancy what they said about him. As he thought of these things he knew why he sought refuge in flight—he was ashamed of the part he had played—ashamed but unrepentant. Simply he couldn't face it so long as there was a loophole of escape. Let them talk. While he wasn't there to hear them he did not greatly care about the opinions they expressed.

And the man he had just parted from, the man he had known out there and who was known to his wife, he would be among the first to cut him when the tale got to his ears. He was no hard-and-fast moralist; but there was a certain code, after all, which could not be disregarded with impunity. In different circumstances Allerton would have been one of the first to acknowledge that. Well, he had disregarded it, and must accept the consequences. Notwithstanding all the bother and the worry which his actions involved him in, he would not have retraced a step of the way, had that been possible.

He informed Gerda of this chance meeting when they were alone together, and discussed with her arrangements for continuing their journeying. He proposed travelling by easy stages through Switzerland and Northern Italy to Venice, where, if she found it sufficiently amusing, he decided to remain over Christmas. As soon as the necessary arrangements could be made they would leave Paris, and in the meantime he took precautions against a further surprise encounter.

It was rather like hiding from justice, he reflected, this constant watchfulness to evade casual recognition. It chafed him; and, though he did not suspect it, this stealthy avoidance of discovery wounded Gerda deeply. She felt that he ought to accept the situation and face the world at her side.

"We are marked people," she said, with a note of hurt pride in her tones. "We can't always run away. We started the scandal; we've got to live it down."

"It will be different when we are married," he answered uneasily.

He was surprised at the change in his views since the early days of their flight. It was she who had felt sensitive then, not he. He wondered what psychological revulsion was responsible for his altered perspective, not taking into account that with the attainment of his desire the ordinary man's values undergo readjustment. Pride in possession diminishes with familiarity. That is a factor which the woman seldom grasps until she is brought face to face with its reality.

That awkward encounter with a friend of former days had hit Allerton unpleasantly. It brought home to him, as nothing else had done so far, a sense of the enormity of his conduct as his world would see it, a realisation of what he had lost in the esteem of men, the place he had forfeited, which he could never hope to regain. He had behaved heartlessly, with a selfish disregard for every obligation. He had deserted his wife for no cause, other than the gratifying of an illicit passion, which nevertheless was the supreme passion of his life. The magic of its fascina-

tion held him still, though its glory showed tarnished beneath the pitiless light of the world's judgment.

With an expression that was infinitely tender, he drew the woman into his arms and kissed the pain from her look.

Shortly after that talk they started for Switzerland. It was while they were in Switzerland that Allerton received a letter from his wife. It had been forwarded to Paris, and, after some delay, reached him among the mountains at Lausanne. The letter was the most complete surprise which he had received. It amazed and worried him exceedingly. He concealed it from Gerda while he considered the wisdom of informing her as to its contents. Finally he decided not to inform her, but to await the development of events.

He refused to accept his wife's decision as irrevocable. She had written in response to his telegram which had refused her request for an interview, and had sent her letter under cover to his lawyers, since she had no other address. In the letter she stated quite definitely that she had no intention of instituting divorce proceedings. It was this statement, so altogether unexpected, which staggered Allerton. He had never taken this possible attitude on his wife's side into account. Oddly enough, neither he nor Gerda had foreseen any bar to their ultimate union. Divorce proceedings had seemed to both of them one of the inevitable results attendant upon their action. He wondered grimly whether, if they had felt any doubt about this, it would have altered anything. Probably not, since passion which is once allowed to get beyond control overrides most obstacles and turns aside from caution.

But he knew that if Maud remained fixed in her resolve it would entail bitter humiliation for Gerda. He was afraid to tell her. He shrank from the thought that if Maud persisted in this attitude it must inevitably come to her knowledge. He refused to believe that her decision would remain unshakable. If necessary he would see her and attempt to persuade her to his view. He owed it to Gerda to leave no stone unturned in his attempt to secure his freedom. But Maud had made use of a very powerful argument for arriving at her decision; it was this, which he had never contemplated, that made her position so unassailable.

"You take it for granted," she wrote, "that I will divorce you; but you are overlooking a very important factor in this case. I say nothing about myself. Since you have left me, and I realise that I have lost your love, that's finished. If there was nothing else to be considered I would give you the freedom you desire willingly; but if, in your selfish thought only for yourself and the woman you love, you forget your duty to your children, on me falls the double responsibility of thinking for them.

"I cannot go into these matters in detail in a letter, that is why I ask you to come and talk things over with me. If you should change your mind and decide to see me, I will not distress you with reproaches or pleading. If I loved you less I might be tempted to this; but I understand you sufficiently to realise how hopeless all that would be.

"In a way, I understand your present feeling and sympathise with you. I would like you to be happy. I am sorry things can't be as you wish. But there's

something bigger, more imperative in life than just the immediate present, the satisfying of one's desires, and the swift reach out after pleasure. We have got to think for to-morrow as well as for to-day. My heart is very sore, and perhaps I am inclined to be unjust. I can't help thinking that in this you have considered only yourselves. People who act as you two have acted are criminally selfish. I can't reconcile that with my idea of either of you."

Allerton kept this letter for a few days while he remained in indecision as to the advisability of disturbing Gerda with its contents or not; eventually, having definitely decided that it was not wise to anticipate unpleasantness, he destroyed it; and sought with its destruction to forget, as far as it was possible to forget a thing which so vitally affected the future, the sense of unalterable finality in its wording.

On one point he was resolved: whatever course Maud elected to take, no earthly consideration should separate him and Gerda.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE next few weeks were spent in travelling. Gerda liked Italy; and they lingered for a while at different places along the route. The sunny Italian people pleased her; she admired their grace and the beauty of the children. Occasionally they encountered a stray English tourist at the hotel, and there would spring out of this chance meeting one of those agreeable friendships which linger pleasantly in the memory in after years, possibly because they are too brief to admit of the small irritations which so often spoil friendships of longer duration. These were pleasures by the way which added to the enjoyment of the long, perfect days.

But Venice pleased Gerda most, Venice with its waterways and palaces, its atmosphere of ancient splendours and art and beauty, which the encroachment of modern thought never utterly subdues nor spoils. The spirit of old Venice lingers and broods over the deep, still waters of the lagoons, and pervades its narrow streets with the haunting suggestion of by-gone ages, and the memory of ancient things and peerless beauty revealed in the mellow sunshine of its open spaces and the purple shadows lurking beneath its colonnades.

"It is a city of dreams," Gerda said. "Here I can be happy. In Venice I can forget all that was ever ugly in my life. Dear, let us stay here."

This idea presented itself to Allerton as a solution of the difficulty which Maud's letter had raised. If Gerda were content to live in Venice, and could forget the past so completely that it ceased to trouble her, the appalling disaster of his wife's refusal to release him lost some of its sting.

But as the pleasant, lazy days went by he began dimly to realize that this life which so fascinated her would not, when the charm of novelty was past, satisfy either them for long. They were both too active mentally to spend their days in a luxurious leisure. The time would come when they would hunger to get back to the world that was familiar and which held all the things which most interested them. Foreign countries and alien peoples amuse for a time, till there arises a sense of exile, and a nostalgia which turns the exile's thoughts towards home; and the need for home and familiar things becomes imperative and urges immediate return. Already he felt the desire stirring in his blood. He believed that in time Gerda would feel it also, though she showed no sign as yet of tiring of the pleasant monotony of the uneventful days. She was like a searcher after the unattainable who has stumbled unexpectedly upon the peace which had seemed to elude her.

"Venice makes me feel good," she said to him once. "It makes me forget—all the things I wish to forget. When I look down upon the deep, quiet waters, or gaze up at the quiet sky, all that has happened seems to belong to another world—seems not to concern me directly. It is as though some one like me, but not myself, some one who was dear to me, had done these things—had hurt me somehow by the wayward course

of her life. The shadow of it falls across me because of her likeness to me. But it is only a shadow—a mist which comes between me and the sun. I think of her as dead, this weak double of mine. She lies beneath these deep waters, and her spirit haunts them. She is always a little sad; she will always feel sorrow for what she did in life. The world is full of sorrow. It's just a little shameful to remember that one ever did anything to add needlessly to its grief. It would be good when one came to die to be able to reflect: 'At least I never by my actions have given causeless pain to another.'

"Very few people could say that, dear," he returned.

They were standing at their window, looking out upon the night-shrouded city, which rested after the labours of the day in a curious hushed repose, disturbed only occasionally by some faint sound or far-off cry that stole up to them out of the quiet dark.

She leaned against him with her head upon his shoulder, the sweet face with its serious eyes lifted to his. Standing so amid the shadows and the silences which the sound of their own voices most frequently dispelled, gripped by the beauty of the night and the peace of their surroundings, a quiet happiness settled upon them. They were less lovers in that hour than they had ever been, they were just two human souls drawn together in a bond of perfect sympathy and accord. It was this ready understanding of each other's moods, of each other's needs, which had forged the unbreakable link between them and ended in disaster. It did not occur to them in that moment that it was disaster which had overtaken

them. They had sacrificed a lot for love; but there was something outside and above the world's condemnation, something which the world can never understand, in the complicated psychology of illicit love, against which it stands ever opposed, which in the opinion of these lovers justified their act. The bond between them was more powerful and enduring than mere sexual attraction. If anything happened to separate them they would remain lovers in thought always.

"Dear," said Gerda very softly, moving her head slightly, so that her face was partly averted and he could no longer see her eyes, those speaking eyes which mirrored their owner's every thought and emotion, "last night I had a curious dream, which left me when I woke so troubled that I had to draw close to you and feel your heart while you slept to make sure that it beat. It was, oh! such a foolish dream; and yet it seemed so real."

"Why didn't you speak of it before?" he asked, and held her tighter. "You've been thinking of it all day."

"You noticed that?" She laughed quietly. "I think I was afraid that you would laugh at me. It was just stupid. I dreamed I was standing on the shore—some lonely beach which seemed familiar, though I can't tell whether I was ever there save in my dream. It was evening, and the sea stretched darkly grey before me, with a grey sky overhead. It was very still and eerie, and there was no one about. I stood alone beside the wide stretch of grey waters. And then suddenly I saw a child standing in the sea. She held a bucket in her hand, and was too preoccu-

pied to notice that the tide was rising rapidly. I called to her; but my voice didn't carry and my feet were rooted to the ground. I knew that I couldn't help—that I couldn't go to her; and all the while the water rose about her, till abruptly it submerged her, and I saw a tiny circle widen on the surface of the sea where she had disappeared. And then, without any sign of your coming, you were there beside me. You didn't look at me or speak, but plunged suddenly into the sea after her. You dropped like a meteoric stone from the sky, as it seemed, a few feet behind the spot where she had disappeared, and the water closed over your head, and a second circle appeared on its surface and widened slowly and came towards me. I remained immovable, and watched, powerless to help or speak. It grew darker; and while I stood there on the lonely shore, watching the ever-widening circle, there was a sound as of a rushing wind overhead. I raised my gaze skyward; and, like two pale stars shooting inland above my head, I watched the souls of you and of the child passing on the rush of the wind. Then all was still again; and I felt terribly alone—not frightened, only terribly lonely and very sad. Why should I dream that dream?"

"Foolish little girl!" he said, stroking her hair. "Why does one dream? And what is a dream, anyway, but an illusion bred of morbid thoughts?"

"I don't know," Gerda said, and stirred uneasily in his arms. "I awoke with the feeling that something was about to happen. The child was possibly an image for something altogether different, and it may be that the passing of your soul with hers signified the passing of some quality in you. The sense of

being left alone—altogether alone for ever—is what troubles me most. That part of the dream, the whole of which was painfully vivid, left the most insistent impression behind.”

“That’s all right, then,” he returned comfortingly. “That’s the least likely thing to happen. Only death can separate you and I, Gerda. We can none of us guard against that, but it doesn’t appear imminent.”

“Ah!” she said, and looked up at him, smiling. “I knew you’d treat it like that. Well, why not? Let us laugh at these stupid things. Why trouble about to-morrow, when to-day is sweet?”

Smilingly, he kissed her. Then he drew her away from the window and pulled the curtain across it, shutting out the night and the world.

They stayed on in Venice longer than Allerton had intended. There were reasons why his presence in England was required: his solicitors wrote urging his return. He kept these matters from Gerda for fear of worrying her, and tried to dismiss them from his own mind, with ill success. It seemed clear that he would have to face Maud and come to some arrangement with her. If she remained obdurate, there was nothing else for it but that he and Gerda should continue to live as they were living at present. It would be a blow for Gerda, he knew. He was not quite sure how she would take it; and the uncertainty worried him.

He was on the point of proposing a return to England when unexpectedly the suggestion came from her. An abrupt cessation of news from home was her reason for wishing to go back. She had written regularly, keeping her mother informed as to her

movements; letters in reply had arrived at irregular intervals. These letters had contained little information, save one which told of a remove from Loughton to London. Mrs. Kitson had given up housekeeping and was living in inexpensive rooms in Gordon Square. No letter was afterwards received, and Gerda, disturbed by the news of this unexpected move, and still more troubled at hearing nothing further, was anxious to get back to find out the meaning of these things. Lack of means was not responsible. Allerton had presented her with a cheque for a large amount, which she had paid into the bank before leaving England for her mother's use. She feared that her mother must be ill; there was no other explanation of her silence.

And so it came about that the return journey was decided upon, and Venice became in reality for Gerda a city of dreams—dreams which vanish upon waking and are never dreamed again. She looked for the last time upon this dream city, set like a jewel in the blue heart of the Adriatic, and felt that she looked upon it for the last time—looked through eyes grown misty with emotion, with a sense of loss and lingering regret for the peace and happiness she had known there, which unaccountably she felt she was leaving behind for ever. All the beauty of their lives there together was but a dream, like the rest. They were going back to the world, to the dishonouring realities, the furtive insincerities of the life she had deliberately chosen.

It seemed to Gerda that their very natures underwent a change as they approached the shores of England—England held in the hard grip of winter,

with the snow powdering the hills and the Channel waters lashed to a white fury by the sharp breath of a northerly gale. Allerton became brisk and a little short in manner, and she felt weary and cold and seasick. Her physical discomfort outweighed every other consideration for the time. She was more conscious of fatigue than of Allerton's irritability, which was due to nervousness aggravated by the cold. She wanted to get ashore, to get some warmth into her chilled body; above all, she wanted a cup of tea—a woman's panacea for most bodily ills.

Allerton, with his coat collar turned up till it met his ears, stood beside her, gazing frowningly at the coast.

"Rotten cold!" he muttered.

She tucked a hand within his arm and shivered slightly. She was wearing furs, and a close-fitting fur toque covered her hair. Despite fatigue and the pallor caused through seasickness, the dark furs set off her beauty and made her good to look upon.

"Think of the jolly fire we'll be seated in front of soon," she said.

He smiled down at her.

"That's cure by suggestion," he said. "But it doesn't renew the circulation in my extremities."

"England extends us a frosty welcome," she said. "Has it ever occurred to you how greatly this cold, severe climate of ours influences our national characteristics? It nips our sympathies. Reserve, intolerance, lack of understanding, may be traced to its blighting influence. A little sunshine is a kindly blessing."

"Why ever did we leave the sunshine?" he asked,

with some abruptness, and stared down at the sullen waters slapping against the vessel's side.

Gerda looked down at the water also, and shivered again.

"Fate leads us," she answered. "It isn't duty, and it isn't pleasure; it's just blind fate."

CHAPTER XXX.

FATE was fairly busy with their affairs during the first weeks after their return. The lawyers claimed Allerton's attention, and Gerda's time was occupied in attending on her mother, who had been very ill, and was making a slow and not very satisfactory convalescence. It seemed very probable that she would remain an invalid for the remainder of her life. Worry and the hardships due to living on very restricted means very largely responsible for this breakdown. Mrs. Kitson insisted on living on her own inadequate income. Wootten had written imploring her not to refuse him the one small consolation left him of acting towards her still as a son; but, as she had explained to him in a letter of affectionate gratitude, she could not do this, though she would always bear him gratefully and lovingly in her thoughts.

The money which Gerda had placed at her disposal remained untouched. She would have starved rather than accept assistance from the man who had ruined her daughter's life. She had sufficient for her own modest needs. Her sons had emigrated. The younger, who had been promised a position in Wootten's office, had been forced to relinquish that idea, and had sailed for Australia recently. His outfit and passage-money had left her very straightened.

Gerda got at these details by judicious questioning. These things saddened her and filled her with remorse. She had not thought of her act as touching her mother, other than by causing her sorrow. She knew that could she have foreseen the far-reaching results of her conduct she would have hesitated to take that irrevocable step. The thing was done now past remedying. She could not help, save in personal service, and, having regard to her mother's very frail hold on life, it did not seem that that would be required of her for long.

She kept these things from Allerton, and only asked him to spare her for a little while so that she might be free to nurse her mother. He assented grudgingly; and she moved from the hotel where they were staying and took a room in the dingy little lodging-house, in order to be in close attendance upon the invalid, and in a position to give her the luxuries she needed, which otherwise she would refuse.

While she was away from him Allerton decided to see his wife and get that matter settled finally. He wrote to her and suggested a meeting; and she wrote back briefly, fixing a day when she would receive him. He had nerved himself to this undertaking, little inclined though he was for a personal interview; but when he got the letter in which she stated her readiness to receive him, he felt so horribly nervous that he was strongly moved not to go. From fear that this reluctance would get the better of him, he sent off a telegram announcing that he would arrive on the morrow at the hour specified.

Nothing that had gone before was quite so nerve-racking as the prospect of this meeting with the

woman he had so cruelly wronged. He resented the necessity for seeing her. It seemed to him that there was a lack of dignity in this insistent demand for an interview. He could not understand what she sought from it, what she expected of him. His lawyers, his own letters, had made it abundantly clear that he would never return to her. In the circumstances, he considered she ought to take the only course left her and divorce him for the sake of all concerned. That, the imperative desire to make her see this thing in a proper light, was his sole reason for going to her. But he did not feel very confident of his power to move her. There was a certain quiet obstinacy in her nature which it was not easy to combat.

It was a cold, wet day on which he went down to Cheltenham. A sleety rain was falling, and the air was raw and wild. He was shown into a sitting-room where a big fire burned in the grate and left alone for a sufficient length of time to allow his nervousness to increase to a point which produced in him a feeling of absolute dismay. He did not know what he should say to her when she came in. He had thought of several things he wished to say, had planned his sentences in advance, had his arguments ready; and now everything eluded him: his mind was entirely blank, paralysed by the hideous nervousness which gripped him, and turned him cold despite the comforting warmth of the room.

He moved nearer to the fire, and stood before it with his hands stretched out to the blaze. He was made aware of his wife's entrance by the opening of the door, but for fully two seconds after it had

closed again he was unable to turn about and face her. The sensation of nervousness was horrible.

When eventually he turned round, he saw her standing watching him with white, tense face and perplexed and saddened eyes. He made some unintelligible sound, and moved to one side of the hearth and stood with his arm on the mantelpiece, holding tightly to the marble slab.

She advanced to the fire and stood opposite to him, still keeping her eyes on his face. She made no attempt at a greeting. For the first few seconds neither of them said anything: they looked steadily at one another, with a pained, intense interest, as though considering each other in the light of their altered conditions.

Then for the first time Maud Allerton spoke.

"I little dreamed when we parted it would be to meet again like this," she said. "You intended this all along—that's why Beryl came to England."

He had not expected this as an opening. Her speech took him slightly aback. He looked away from her into the red glow of the fire and was silent.

"I wish you had been more frank with me," she said.

"Look here!" Allerton lifted his gaze suddenly, lifted it to the white, strained face opposite that wore still its expression of perplexed and hurt curiosity. Her control was marvellous, but he detected beneath the wonderful calm of her manner the sense of outrage, of wounded pride, which had all but broken her spirit. He had never admired her more than in that moment of painful tension; but his feeling for her underwent no change, was utterly devoid of any

warmer sentiment. Simply the old love was dead: he doubted even whether it was love he had felt for her ever. "It isn't any use going over the old ground," he said. "I have behaved abominably. I'm ashamed of myself. I've given up trying to understand the thing—it's beyond understanding, beyond control. I'm sorry to have hurt you—deeply sorry."

"Oh, that!" She looked down into the flames with the first faint quiver of her lips betraying how greatly she was moved. "I've borne with that for a long while. You don't suppose—do you?—that your actual desertion of me has hurt me more than the withdrawal of your love long ago? One learns to endure; we have been apart a long time. I knew there was something—but I never even dimly guessed at this. I can scarcely believe it of you—even now. There were so many reasons why you ought to have fought against the thing. You could have conquered temptation. I know you well enough to feel sure of that. You ought to have done it. There was so much at stake."

"You don't understand," he interposed in self-defence. "You can't even remotely gauge the strength of such temptation. Your temperament is all opposed to such things. I could no more prevent what happened than I can prevent the rain from falling now. I fell in love. We won't go into that. God knows the whole miserable business is painful enough! I didn't come here for the purpose of hurting you. I want to discuss with you the subject of our relations."

oe paused, and with his elbow on the mantel, rested his head on his hand and stared thoughtfully into the flames.

"Yes!" she said, and waited expectantly.

"Your letter came as a great surprise to me," he continued, his voice hardening. "I can't understand your attitude. It isn't like you to be vindictive."

"Vindictive!" Her eyes darkened in incredulous amazement. "Surely you can't mean that?"

"What else am I to think?" he responded. "It is in your power to act generously or otherwise. I am in your hands. I want to lead a clean and decent life. There is only one way in which that is possible. I have asked you for my freedom—have given you every reason for divorcing me—and you have refused. I am hoping you will reconsider your refusal."

For a long while Mrs. Allerton remained silent, so long a while that he inclined to believe she did not purpose answering him. He glanced towards her sharply, his thoughts taking a bitter turn that moved him to utter reproaches which later he would have regretted; but before he could speak she looked towards him and asked a question of him.

"Can you advance a single reason in support of your request which in importance outweighs the reason I have given you for refusing it?" she said.

He changed colour under her steady gaze, and shifted his foot uneasily on the curb, and avoided her eyes.

"I thought I had stated my reason," he returned. And added bluntly: "I mean to stick to Gerda in any circumstance, and naturally I want to give her my name. I attach little importance to your objection to institute divorce proceedings on account of the children. They are too young to be greatly affected. I can't consider that argument. I rob them of nothing in forfeiting my claim upon them. By the time

they are old enough to understand these things the scandal will have been forgotten."

"We look at things so differently," she said, her steady eyes still fixed upon him with their expression of wondering intensity, as though they sought to read the thoughts in these unexplored regions of his mind which before she had never suspected.

He had seemed to her once a simply direct man of honourable feeling and fine ideals. She realised that she had never known the real man: this was the real man who now confronted her, a man streaked with evil, which showed through the veneer of conventional training, and was indistinguishably mixed with the finer qualities he undoubtedly possessed. Circumstances had brought the evil to the surface, but it had lain dormant at the root of his nature always.

"I don't know whether I can make you appreciate my view of things," she said; "but I'll try to. That is why I wished to see you. I knew that I could never properly express myself in a letter. I never hoped to win you back—I don't think I wish that even. I could never feel the same towards you. But for the sake of the children I am quite prepared to live with you on friendly terms when you tire of your mistress and are ready to come back."

He looked up quickly, as though he would have spoken, but checked the impulse and returned to staring into the flames that leapt forth from the logs and threw a warm glow upon the glazed tiles on the hearth, and upon the soft brown folds of the dress which Maud Allerton wore. She moved slightly, and put up a hand and played nervously with a photograph on the mantelpiece.

"Never for one moment did I seriously consider instituting divorce proceedings," she said, "even when you asked me—or rather, took it for granted that I would. If I have failed as a wife, I shall never fail as a mother. The man or woman who is not prepared to accept the full responsibility of parenthood has no right to bring life into the world. Your disregard for your children's welfare is the most reprehensible part of your conduct. You have injured them; you know it. You seek to injure them further. This sort of thing clings. It brings discredit on every one concerned. In a few years, when, as I hope, you will think more wisely and return, the scandal will die down. Much is forgiven a man—unfortunately for the system of public morals. But if I were to divorce you, the stigma would cling to the girls in the future. People would talk of the taint in the blood. That is what I wish to prevent."

"That is your final answer?" he said, in a voice that rang harsh and cold as steel.

She looked at him appealingly.

"Oh," she exclaimed, the unexpected tears springing to her eyes, "how hard you are making it for me! Are you so changed that you can't feel a little for me? What have I ever done that all this should happen to me?"

Allerton reddened "uncomfortably," and with an overdone air of indifference pushed back a log that had fallen forward with his foot.

"I don't wish to be brutal," he said; "but you are driving me hard. I came here, sorry and ashamed, to make an appeal—not altogether selfishly. Even at the risk of hurting you further, I am bound to urge

my side of the case. I have to consider the woman who has given up everything for me. I love her. I shall never leave her. I want to marry her. Do you suppose it is nothing to her, the disgrace of her present position? In the name of decency, release me and let me live my own life. I beg that of you as the last favour I shall ever ask. It is the only dignified course to take. Release me and let me marry decently."

"Why should I," she demanded, with a show of spirit, "consider your happiness and that of your mistress rather than my children's interest? You two have acted regardless of every consideration. You've hurt others from purely selfish motives. I realise that in refusing to divorce you I shall alienate sympathy from myself. It renders my position doubly humiliating. But these matters don't weigh with me. I am thinking solely of the children. I see no good reason why I should consult the happiness of two people who have deeply injured me in preference to the well-being of my children's future."

He straightened himself angrily and moved away from the fire and took up his hat.

"Briefly, you won't."

"I won't," she echoed dully, and sank into a chair and remained looking into the fire through the blur of her tears—remained so, long after the closing of the door told her that her husband had left her finally, had gone out of her life with anger in his heart against her.

The tears fell faster, large, heavy drops that splashed unheeded upon the cold, clenched hands in her lap.

CHAPTER XXXI

A FEW days later Beryl called to see her brother-in-law at his hotel. He was not in, and she was shown into a private room to wait. She had come without her sister's knowledge and without making an appointment with Allerton, moved by an irresistible impulse to seek an interview with him for the purpose of discovering for herself whether matters were as hopeless as Maud represented them to be. She could not believe, unless she heard it from his own lips, that his desertion of his wife and family, the consequent wrecking of her sister's life, was what he deliberately planned.

In her opinion he was made of sterner qualities than his actions would seem to prove. She believed that the obsession that held him would pass. People obsessed as he was were not wholly responsible for their acts.

The overwhelming nature of the catastrophe which had followed so speedily on their arrival in England had shocked and grieved her beyond measure. She was fond of her brother-in-law; she had admired and loved Gerda Wootten. That these two people should commit this wrong was, to her, grievous and inexplicable. These two were possessed of unusual qualities—fine qualities; she was sure of that. She could not understand their doing anything vile. Possibly it

was these same unusual qualities which had drawn them to one another in the first instance—there was a sort of likeness between them, a restless desire for things which their world did not offer—beauty, romance; each had shown at time unmistakably a dissatisfaction with life. She had seen that, had sympathised in a measure with their discontent. But she had never supposed that either of them could behave dishonourably. She had believed in them. She felt that they had cheated her somehow, and was angry and hurt with them in consequence.

Her visit to George Allerton was not made with any idea of attempting to influence him, but rather to discover what was the attitude he actually took; whether reconciliation was as hopeless as Maud believed it to be. A kind of belief in some possible readjustment had upheld her hitherto; she had held a feeling that matters might be patched up even now. But while she waited for him, perhaps because she had not prepared herself for this delay, her hope slowly evaporated and left her with a chilled sense of futility. She almost regretted having come. It would possibly only anger him when he returned and found her there.

While she sat there revolving these matters in her mind, the door of the room opened, and, in expectation of seeing her brother-in-law enter, she turned quickly, and rose and stood still, gravely silent before the new-comer, who was ushered in, as she had been ushered in, to await Allerton's return. It was Gerda—Gerda, looking very lovely and a little sad, with manifestly surprised brown eyes gazing steadily into the reproachful blue eyes raised to meet her gaze.

They remained so, looking at one another, not in

hostility, just distressed and mutually interested in each other, and faintly embarrassed by the unexpectedness of the encounter.

"Oh!" said Beryl, and made a little inadequate gesture and was still again.

But the spell was broken. Gerda moved abruptly towards the door.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know any one was here," she said.

And the almost forgotten sweetness of her tones set loose a chain of memories in the other girl's brain. A rush of emotion held her, and brought a lump into her throat. This was the woman who had bewitched her in the past, bewitched them all with her beauty, her sweetness, the gay charm of her personality. The charm and the beauty were there still, the sweet womanliness of her. In that moment Beryl realised that if it were not her own sister's happiness that had been ruined, she could have forgiven what she had done, could have found excuses for her—this woman who had married the wrong man and had left him for love's sake.

The old fascination was reasserting itself. Her girlish sympathies swayed between loyalty to her sister and compassion towards this woman, who in winning love had lost everything else. She wanted to say something, wanted to speak to her, to prevent her going. Her mind was crowded with ideas that jostled one another and tripped each other up, and made expression difficult.

"Don't go," she said jerkily. "I want to talk to you. Please don't go away."

Slowly Gerda turned round and came towards her.

A smile that was wistful, almost appealing, hovered about her mouth. There were tears in her eyes.

"Are you quite sure you want to talk to me?" she said.

And then Beryl broke down. The strain of the past months, with the repressions, the forced cheerfulness, which her position of confidante and consoler of her sister had demanded of her, told now, betraying itself in this sudden loss of control. She made an ineffectual struggle to keep under her emotion; and finding her efforts of no avail in checking the storm of tears which insisted on an outlet, abandoned the attempt, and to their mutual amazement was soon weeping uncontrollably in the other woman's arms.

Gerda led her to a sofa and sat down beside her, still holding her, but uttering no words of consolation. What consolation could she offer? What, in the face of everything, was there left for her to say? Beryl stirred in her arms, and made a passionate dab at her eyes with her saturated handkerchief.

"What a fool I am!" she exclaimed petulantly. "Crying like a kid that has hurt herself!"

Crying like a kid whom some one else had hurt. would have expressed it more correctly, Gerda thought.

"Tears are a relief sometimes," she said soothingly. "Let them come."

"They don't wait for permission," Beryl returned with a rueful laugh. "What a deluge! I'll be all right in a minute."

She dabbed her eyes again, and sat up and looked into the compassionate face above her with a half-shamed expression showing through the tears.

"That's the last thing I expected to do," she said. "I thought I had grown out of crying."

"No one does that, I think. You've been worried. I am afraid the sight of me upset you."

"It was a surprise," Beryl admitted. "Though I don't know why I should have been so unprepared. I might have known that in coming here I was likely to meet you. I came to see George."

"Would you like me to go away?"

"No. I want to talk to you."

They scrutinised one another for a while attentively. Then Beryl said, with a new quality in her voice and a sudden softening of her whole expression:

"I can't, you know, help feeling sorry for you."

A soft flush stole into Gerda's face; her eyes were puzzled. The meeting had been a great surprise to her, an astonishment and a distress; but this was the greatest surprise of all.

"Why should you feel sorry for me?" she asked.

Beryl disregarded this question: she seemed scarcely to notice it.

"George has done you, as well as Maud, a great wrong," she said. "I think that's why I came to see him—to tell him that. It wouldn't have done much good, would it? Perhaps it is just as well he isn't here."

"It wouldn't have done any good. And it isn't true," Gerda replied. "We have both of us done your sister a great wrong. He knows that without your telling. I don't think he ever forgets it for a moment."

"It is breaking her heart," Beryl said. "She's changed. You don't know what it means to her. They were such chums. I can't understand him—I

can't understand you. Sometimes I feel that it's just a bad dream—that I'll wake presently and find you sweet and good as I once thought you, and George sane once more, and happy with his family. Maud would forgive him even now, if he returned to her. Why do you keep them apart?"

Gerda regarded the speaker in astonishment, too thoroughly taken by surprise to resent what she said in her agitation. Her grief for her sister was sufficiently evident to disarm any annoyance she might otherwise have felt at this direct attack. But the picture of Maud Allerton broken-hearted through her husband's desertion of her did not move her. She could imagine her angry, with feelings outraged, her pride humbled by this upheaval of her pleasant life and the disagreeable publicity attending it; but she did not believe her heart was seriously torn. And this talk of forgiveness sounded in her incredulous ears almost unseemly. It was this part of the girl's speech which caught and held her attention.

"Forgive him!" she repeated in tones of amazement. "You speak, surely, without authority. No woman forgives an injury of that nature."

"Maud would—for the sake of the children. Give him back to her. She loves him still."

Gerda shook off the hand which the girl had placed upon her arm—shook it off not ungently, but insistently, as though its touch stung her. Her face had grown very white and strained, her lip trembled.

"Loves him!" she cried, in low, passionate accents that betrayed a tendency to break with the emotion she repressed with such difficulty. "She never loved him as I love him. He is all the world to me. And I

—I have no child—nothing. I have only him. Would she take him back—without love—knowing that all his love is mine? I can't understand that. I can't believe it."

"I don't understand these things myself," Beryl answered simply. "I only know that she loves him more than she loves herself. I suppose that is why she can forgive. In her place I couldn't forgive. I shouldn't wish to see him any more. She is finer made than I am. She is just—splendid."

She stood up somewhat abruptly, and crossed to the fireplace and stood before the overmantle, rearranging her disordered hair and straightening her hat. Gerda observed her without speaking while she took the pins out of her hat and replaced them. The traces of emotion were still visible in the redness of her eyelids. She noticed that, and experienced a feeling of self-pity at the sight of her swollen features.

"A nice face to take out with me into the streets!" she said.

Slowly she turned round.

"I have not done any good in coming," she said. "I don't know what I expected to do exactly. I think I just wanted to discover whether things were so altogether hopeless as they appeared to be. It's all such a muddle! I don't see any light. I was to have returned to Port Elizabeth next month—to be married. That has to be postponed anyhow. I can't leave Maud. You see how it is. . . . The control of all our lives is in your hands. That's a big responsibility."

"That isn't fair," Gerda replied. "You have no right to say that."

Beryl smiled sadly.

"It is difficult to define right in a case like this," she said. "It seems to me all so wrong. I am not judging you. I blame George more. There was more to hold him to the path of honour. But at the same time your influence with him is immense. You could—any good woman could—keep the worst of men to the track. Wouldn't it have been worth something—even of self-sacrifice—to know that your influence had not been misused? You'll say I am moralising, that I am only an ignorant little prig. Perhaps that's true. Anyway, I want you to know, since we are not likely to meet again, that I have loved you—in a way, I love you still. You've hurt me the more because of that. I am bitterly disappointed—in you—just because it is you who have done this."

Gerda rose and walked away from her, and stood with her back to her, looking out of the window. She rested one arm against the window sash and leaned her head despondently upon her hand. There was nothing startlingly new in anything which the girl said; the same thoughts, the same reproaches, self-applied, had tormented her unceasingly. There was only one thing which she heard now that she had not suspected before, that the wife whom she had injured loved her husband. Somehow, perhaps because the girl had not insisted on this in any exaggerated language, but had stated the fact with simple sincerity, the truth of it gripped her convincingly. She had come between this man and the wife who had loved him, and had spoilt their lives. She had spoilt Fred Wootten's life also, and her mother's. It was in very truth a big responsibility to shoulder. Beneath the weight of it her spirit was being slowly broken.

"I can't bear it," she said, and half turned round.

As she did so the door of the room opened again and George Allerton came in.

CHAPTER XXXII

HE stood just inside the room, frowning, looking from one white, wrung face to the other with an expression of angry wonder in his eyes. He had heard below who his visitors were, and had entered prepared to find Beryl there. What he could not understand was why she had come, at whose instigation. He put to her bluntly the first question that presented itself to him.

"Who told you to come?" he asked.

"I came to see you," she answered, her face warming with indignation. "No one told me to come—no one knows I am here. Surely you can't think anything else?"

"I didn't know." He advanced further into the room and took up his position midway between his sister-in-law and Gerda. The latter turned again to the window and leaned with her head on her hand as before.

"I am sorry you came," he said briefly.

"I am beginning to regret it also," Beryl answered with spirit, and added, with a sudden softening of both voice and manner: "But when one is troubled about some one whom one loves one doesn't stop to consider how one's interference may be received. I came to find out the truth for myself."

"Well?" he said.

"I've learned, I think, pretty well all there is to be learned from her." She indicated Gerda with a gesture. Somehow she could not bring herself to utter her name. "You two mean to stick together. Maud and the children don't count. It is no use looking at me like that, George. This unhappy business concerns me also. I suppose we'll settle down to it in time—make the best of things. But at the moment it doesn't appear that any one is wildly happy. Results don't, in my opinion, justify the misery you've brought about. I am going now. There isn't anything to be said. I can't say anything—before her."

"I'll go away," Gerda said tonelessly.

"No," Allerton interposed; "there is no need. What's the good of talking? Look here, Beryl, you've got your job—to look after Maud and the children. She'll get used to things. There is nothing else for it. You stated plain facts just now—Gerda and I mean to stick together. That's what it amounts to. The time for discussing the right and the wrong of things is past."

He followed her when she crossed the room to the door, and opened it for her.

"You've been a brick," he said, bending down to her ear. "I'm awfully grateful to you, Beryl. I am ashamed of myself, and sorry. But I can't help what's happened. I don't want to help it. I belong to her body and soul. Good-bye, dear."

"Good-bye," she answered quietly, and went swiftly out of the room without looking at him, with never a backward look at the woman standing in the window with her back towards them, gazing out upon the street.

Slowly, as the door closed upon her, Gerda turned round. She approached Allerton; and he took her by the hand and pulled her down on the sofa beside him.

"I am sorry you were let in for that," he said. "Has she been here long?"

"Long! I don't know. It seemed like hours. Ah, dear Heaven! why is the world so full of ghosts? The things she said! . . . not much—just little truths that hurt. George, I didn't know your wife loved you."

"What's that got to do with it?" he asked impatiently.

Gerda pressed his hand.

"It counts—just a little," she said softly. "It raises another ghost. There are so many of them. They trouble me."

"They don't trouble me," he answered. "I've no time for ghosts. Be sensible, dear. You didn't imagine we should get through without any bother, did you? We have to face the music for a little longer; then we will take a holiday and lay the ghosts for ever."

"But if she won't divorce you?" Gerda said, sticking to her point.

He seized her in his arms and held her in a passionate clasp pressed hard against his heart.

"Then we will go to another country and change our name," he said, punctuating the words with kisses upon her mouth. "As God hears me, I'll never leave you. You trust me, Gerda? You know that our love sanctifies our union as no law that was ever framed could do. I love you, little witch. You

are a part of myself. I would cut the heart out of my body sooner than lose you now, my darling. Maud is for fighting. She's trying to hold me. It isn't a question of love, but of expediency. She is considering the children mainly. When she finds how useless it is she'll give in. We have to wait and hope for the best. It will all come right in the end. It must."

He drew back his head and looked her steadily in the eyes.

"You trust me, Gerda?"

"Haven't I proved that?" she asked.

He pressed his lips to hers again.

"Sweetest and dearest of women," he said, "I know. I was a fool to ask. But I'm worried, dear—worried for you. I didn't foresee all the difficulties. Why did we leave Venice, Gerda? You were happy there."

"Happy! Was I happy? Dearest heart, don't you know that happiness lies within us? It has nothing to do with any one corner of earth. I am happy now—with you. But when the night comes, and I lie awake and think—think of all the sadness I have brought into other lives, then I know that my happiness is but a daydream—a shadow, like the rest. And my heart is filled with sorrow. I weep and weep until I fall asleep. Then, when the morning comes, the sorrow is still there. I look into my glass, and it is not happiness which I see in the eyes that look back into mine. We cannot buy happiness at the cost of happiness to others. I've learnt a lot, my dear, during these past few months. And among the things I've learned is that the more eagerly happiness is desired the less readily is it enjoyed. I've loved. I've

sinned for love's sake. I'm not regretting our love, dear—don't think it—but I do regret the sin. It makes ugly what should be wholly beautiful. It spoils things."

"You are depressed," he said. "That's the result of seeing Beryl. I wish I had got here sooner. I won't have you worried. It's not likely to happen again, that's one consolation. You aren't bothering over anything Beryl said, are you?"

She did not answer immediately; she leaned against him despondently and her face was sad. Some words which Beryl had uttered rang like a refrain in her brain. "She has changed. It is breaking her heart."

"I never realised that she loved you deeply," she said at last. "It is breaking her heart, Beryl said. She wants you."

"Now listen to me," he said seriously. "Whatever Maud's feeling for me is, it doesn't affect the situation. She wouldn't live with me again as my wife, even if I wished that. I don't wish it. We couldn't patch this if we tried. We have chosen our lives, you and I. We've got to stand to that."

"Yes," she said, "yes. But——"

He broke in on the halting sentences.

"Maud will get used to it in time. No woman, I imagine, accepts such a position without protest. But it's indecent, this pestering of a man when matters have reached a climax. I confess I don't understand the motive which actuates a woman in refusing to divorce her husband. There's a quality of meanness about it which baffles the male understanding. There's no satisfaction in it for any one. And it forces you

into a hateful position. That's what I resent. For myself it doesn't matter a jot. I'm yours till death parts us. My marriage vows were taken on the night you first gave yourself to me. No legal ceremony could be more binding in its obligation. My dearest, I worship the ground which your dear feet press. I have loved you from the moment when I heard you laugh as I stood outside the gate in the dusk. Something spoke to me then—spoke to my heart through the magic of that laugh from unseen lips. It rang in my ears like the mating song of some sweet, wild bird. Oh, little girl, it's worth it!—worth everything, just to hold you in my arms and know you are mine—mine wholly and for ever."

He kissed her again and released her, and stood up.

"All this talk of duty doesn't impress me; I don't believe in sacrificing happiness to a mere sense of duty. These bloodless ideals are unworkable," he added, standing before her, observant of the struggle which was taking place in her mind and leaving its traces in the thoughtful lines in her face. "Put these thoughts away, Gerda. You are harrowing yourself to no purpose. Come along! We'll get out of this and have tea somewhere together. I've a box for the theatre to-night. I'll call for you early, and we'll dine first and make a night of it. Come!"

He held out his hands. She put hers into them and let him pull her up from the sofa.

"I don't think the theatre is a suitable form of entertainment for us," she said.

"Why not?" he asked.

"The drama deals in poetic justice," she replied.

"That isn't life, you know, whatever the moralists

think about it. Virtue doesn't often end on the triumphant note. If I wrote a play I would show how all the people who lead good, honest lives are dull—oh, so dull! And all the virtuous women in my play would be cold and hard and unlovable; and the men whom women love would be greedy for pleasure, and selfish and brilliant, so brilliant that they always amuse and attract; the women whom men love I would portray just beautiful—not good, not very clever; but pleasant to look at, and shallow, and always kind to those men whom they love. My play wouldn't pass the censor." She laughed lightly. "How many of life's dramas would the censor pass, if such an office existed?"

Gerda dressed early that evening. She put on one of the prettiest of the dresses which Allerton had bought for her in Paris, and appeared before her mother in the dingy, meanly-furnished sitting-room like some brilliant humming-bird adrift from its environment. The room looked shabbier, more sordid, in contrast with her radiant beauty and the splendour of her attire.

Mrs. Kitson surveyed her with eyes in which pride and distress both struggled for expression. She had grown accustomed to see Gerda dressed for the evening, and to watch her start out for some entertainment to which Allerton took her fairly frequently. Usually she was in bed when he called; but this evening she decided to remain up, not for the purpose of seeing him; he seldom came into the sitting-room. It was Gerda's habit to watch for the taxi and run down and intercept him before the admiring servant had time to conduct him upstairs. Mrs. Kitson had

never seen the man who had ruined her daughter's life. She had no wish to see him. But that evening neither she nor Gerda heard his ring. They were made aware of his arrival by the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. Gerda, seated on the arm of her mother's chair, sprang up confused, and caught up her cloak as the footsteps halted on the landing outside, and the servant, first knocking on the door, threw it open and showed Allerton in.

He was as greatly disconcerted as the occupants of the room. On the few occasions when he had been shown into the little sitting-room it was to find Gerda alone there. He had not expected to see her mother, and the surprise he felt manifested itself in his expression. He changed colour, and stood awkwardly just within the room, looking with clouded, handsome eyes into the faded face that was sufficiently like the daughter's to proclaim the relationship, and which, turned towards him in a surprise no less evident than his own, betrayed its owner's heartfelt disapproval. Behind the disapproval there was open curiosity in her look.

"Mother," Gerda said, with a nervous catching of her voice, "this is George. I didn't hear you come," she added, approaching Allerton, and breaking the tension of which each was painfully aware. "I'm quite ready."

His features relaxed in a smile.

"I must apologise for intruding," he said, and took her cloak and helped her on with it. "I am afraid I ought not to have come up. Please forgive me."

He looked directly at the silent figure in the big chair as he made his appeal, a shrunken, pathetic fig-

ure, the sight of which, perhaps because of the so striking resemblance to the woman whom he loved, moved him to a desire to win her liking, to propitiate her if possible, to break down the chill antagonism of her attitude, of which he was unhappily aware.

"That is a small matter to forgive," she said. "You must excuse me from rising. I am still an invalid."

"I know," he answered. "I am glad to see you so far recovered. I hear of you, though I have not had the pleasure of meeting you before."

"Is it a pleasure?" she asked.

"On my side, yes," he replied. "I wish I had not reason to suppose you feel differently about it. You are thinking rather badly of me, I fear. I know there is much which you can't forgive. But you are her mother; therefore it cannot surprise you that I love her."

"No, that doesn't surprise me," Mrs. Kitson answered. "I am only surprised that you do not love her more."

"I could not love her more. I love her with all my heart," he said simply.

"But you put yourself first," she returned; "otherwise you would have studied her well-being in preference to your happiness."

"I hoped they were synonymous terms," he said.

"I cannot recognise that," she said. "What have you to give her in place of all she has lost?"

"All my love," he answered, and put an arm around Gerda's shoulders and held her so.

Mrs. Kitson continued her close scrutiny of him. From him she looked sadly upon her daughter. There

was no doubt as to their love for one another; it shone like a light in their faces.

"She is happy with me," he said. "That is my defence. In my opinion happiness is of supreme importance."

"Not when taking one's happiness includes giving pain to others," she insisted. "If it wasn't for the lives you've wrecked I could better understand your giving up all for love. I suppose I am old-fashioned: this ordering of one's life to suit one's own convenience is horrible to me. Men and women rate honour less highly than they used to do. I think that life is sadder and poorer on that account."

"Don't you think that perhaps it is not a matter of rating honour less highly, but of a readjustment of values?" he asked. "Instead of unduly exalting high-flown principles, we are more honest in these days, and attach greater importance to the qualities which really count. We didn't take the plunge without careful consideration."

"That makes it worse," she said, with a sound of tears in her voice.

Gerda ran to her, and hung over her lovingly, trying with all the devices which affection prompted to drive the sadness from her face. In her weakened condition the excitement of this interview was too much for her. Gerda made a sign to Allerton to end it. She felt glad that these two had met. The bitter hostility which Mrs. Kitson had cherished against George Allerton was already wearing down. If she could not forgive the man the wrong he had done, at least she better understood the quality of the affection which held between him and her daughter.

He was the type of man to love strongly and to win love.

Allerton, observing the two women, noting the agitation of the one and the other's concern for her, was moved to suggest postponing the evening's pleasure to another night, and was well rewarded for this act of self-denial by the swift, bright smile he won from Gerda.

"I think you ought to stay with her," he said.

She nodded. "I am not particularly keen on the theatre anyway."

"So you explained this afternoon. Come downstairs and let me out. It's time I went."

To his surprise Mrs. Kitson held out a trembling hand.

"You will think me a tiresome old woman," she said wistfully.

"If you were a better thought reader," he said, "you would know that that was the last thing in my mind. I'm awfully sorry to have blundered in on you. I'm sorry for all the trouble I have caused you. I know you don't feel like forgiving me. But perhaps one day you may do even that."

He bent over the hand he held and touched it with his lips.

BOOK V: LEADING-STRINGS

*"The reason why all men honour love is because it looks
up, and down; aspires, and not despairs."*

EMERSON.

BOOK V: LEADING-STRINGS

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE months passed, effecting certain changes in the lives of those immediately concerned in the Wootten divorce case. Wootten obtained his decree. There had been no defence, and the case worked through to its inevitable finish. Allerton was faced with damages and the costs, and the humiliating knowledge that he could never marry the woman he loved, the woman who was free to marry, and who wanted him. She had every right to feel injured at his inability to fulfil his part of the undertaking.

The refusal of Mrs. Allerton to divorce her husband came to Woottens' knowledge in due course and occasioned him a shock of amazement. Oddly, he resented her attitude. He regarded it as an act of conspiracy in which the wife, conjointly with the husband, sought to injure and degrade the weak and erring woman who had spoilt her own life as well as his, sacrificing everything for the love of a man utterly unworthy of her affection.

The thought of Gerda, discredited and alone, moved him to a sort of pity for her. It was, he told himself, the surest sign that his love for her was dead that he could feel sufficiently kindly towards her to

experience any stirrings of pity for her in her distress. A revulsion of feeling swept over him. In his imagination he pictured her, beautiful and ashamed and broken-hearted, the mistress of the man who had lured her away under a promise of marriage—a promise which he could not fulfil, which he must have realised at the time was doubtful of fulfilment. He hated Allerton for the deception he had practised upon her. And Maud Allerton's disdainful ignoring of the right of the woman whom her husband had seduced to the full protection he had sworn to give her, angered him in a different way. He did not see the matter from her point of view. In his opinion it was a deliberate and determined attempt to punish and humiliate a rival.

The affair created considerable discussion in the place where the protagonists were so well known. Mrs. Allerton's attitude met with unfavourable criticism. One man—Fielding—deplored it, because he would gladly have married her had she elected to obtain her freedom. But he was silent on the subject.

Trevor also maintained silence. He secretly rejoiced in the turn of events. Later he proposed making the journey to England in the hope of succeeding Allerton in Gerda's affections. He was not particular as to the method by which he gained his end: he was prepared, if necessary, to make her his wife. The matter of the divorce rather enhanced her value in his eyes, while her unenviable position increased his chance of winning her, he believed. Like Fielding, he listened to the talk at the club and elsewhere, and was silent.

Wootten no longer frequented the club. He had be-

come misanthropic since his wife left him, and had fallen into the habit of spending all his leisure in his home—if the house where he ate and slept could be called home. Every evening he might be seen seated before his organ, often simply sitting there staring at the music-sheet on the stand unseeingly, with inactive fingers on the keyboard, lost in a reverie so profound that the time would pass unmarked, and the street would fall into silence, and the lights in the neighbouring houses be extinguished before he roused himself and came out of his abstraction to face the realities of his lonely and aimless existence.

"It must be largely my fault," he mused. "There must be something wrong with me that I cannot hold the love of a woman."

That idea took possession of his mind and strengthened to a morbid conviction of his own unworthiness. The sweetness had gone from his world and left it empty. His life was stripped bare through his wife's desertion, as a tree is sometimes stripped, not by the changes of season, but by a devastating element or poisonous vapour which saps its vitality and strips it of the leaves which will never bud again on its branches. Hope in the human breast is as the sap in the tree. Take hope from the individual and you rob the soul of its vitality. Wootten had passed the age when one recuperates easily; and his temperament was all against a facile adaptability. He had loved: he loved still, though he refused to acknowledge it. Separated from the woman whom he had idolised, he was utterly lonely; all his purpose in life was gone. Had she died, the effect on him would have been much the same, though shorn of its bitterness. His nature was of

that quality which becomes absorbed in its own emotions.

He came in time to regard her almost as one dead. She was dead to him. He thought of her so when he played the organ in the evenings, and recalled how she had liked to sit outside on the stoep in the warm darkness and listen while he played. He played now to her memory; and his heart would soften towards her, and his mind become filled with kindly, gracious memories, till the bitterness would melt away, and only sorrow, poignant, heart-felt anguish at her loss, found its place in his soul.

Gerda was at this time living with Allerton in a house on the banks of the Thames. Allerton had taken it furnished for the summer months, and had subsequently bought it as it stood and given it as a present to Gerda, because she had once expressed the wish that it was hers. She loved the place. The house was not large, but it was convenient and pretty, and the grounds sloped in green terraces to the river, that showed, a gleaming band of silver, through the overhanging branches of the willows which shaded the lawns and the little private landing-stage below the path.

Much of their time during the long summer days was spent upon the river. Usually in the evenings they motored up to town. When winter came they took a flat in town, and returned with the spring to their summer house. It was a life of quiet contentment and simple pleasures. They were happy in each other's society, and if the knowledge that they could never hope to marry occasionally disturbed them, they never spoke of it. They behaved as ordinary married peo-

ple whose lives were linked together for all time, not as two people overshadowed by the dark cloud of disgrace. But the cloud was there, though it showed very distant in the summer sky.

Towards the end of the second summer the intimation of its presence manifested itself with startling unexpectedness to both of them. The cloud darkened suddenly in their sky, and loomed overhead sombre and uncertain, with the disconcerting effect of a threatened deluge from a sky of sunlit blue.

A letter arrived one morning for Allerton while he and Gerda were out on the river together. It lay on a table in the hall awaiting their return. They reached home towards the luncheon hour, and, mooring their boat to the landing-stage, walked along the path together and rested awhile on the sloping lawn beneath the shade of the trees.

Allerton, watching with lazy admiration the slender, graceful lines of the woman who lay back in indolent ease against the grassy bank, with her hat beside her, the red-brown hair contrasting brightly with the green background, felt amazingly restful and content with life. Never before had he known such full and complete satisfaction. He felt grateful to the woman beside him for the happiness she had brought into his life. He loved her now with a steadier, purer love than he had felt for her when he persuaded her to give up everything for love's sake. He had desired her passionately then; he desired her still; but passion had cooled with him, and love had strengthened with the passage of time.

Suddenly Gerda sat up, and started to tidy her disordered hair.

"I've shed half my hairpins," she complained.

"What does it matter?" he asked. "You look jolly with your hair like that. Let it tumble down if it wants to. It's awfully pretty hair. You look like a kid with it falling about your shoulders."

"I feel like a kid these days," she answered, and smiled up at him happily. "I've gone back—oh, ever so far! You are boy to my girl. We aren't responsible, grown-up people at all. We are playing at being married—that's what it feels like—playing with life. This is my doll's house. I lie here on the lawn and listen to the music of the river as it flows lazily past, and try to understand its song. Always it seems to say: 'I hold a secret in my bosom. . . . Guess!' And I guess and guess; but I've never discovered the secret. What is it?"

"You ought to know," he said. "I thought every one knew. Its secret is the song of content. And its content lies in the undisturbed fulfilment of its destiny. It starts from the infinitesimal drop of rain; it gathers the precious drops into its bosom, and they make music as they mingle in their glad journey down to the sea. The life of man should be undisturbed as the life of the river; but we interfere with it, and turn it from its course, till its song of content is changed into a song of complaining. We erect artificial barriers and start artificial draining, and contrive generally to make a muddle of things."

"We won't distress ourselves with thinking of the muddles," Gerda said. "I want only to listen to the river's song of content. It's in my heart, that song. I am so glad that this place is mine, that I

can live here always! I think I shall grow like the river—sublimely contented.”

He laughed, and pulled one of the curls which blew lightly against his sleeve.

“Woman of moods,” he said, “your content is like the river’s content—a song of summer.”

“And summer is passing,” she said, and indicated a yellowing branch on an elm-tree within sight, the first golden suggestion that autumn was advancing.

“Oh, we’ve not done with it yet!” he returned. “That nip in the air was altogether too precocious.”

A gong sounded from the direction of the house. Allerton got up and assisted her to rise.

“Lunch? Well, I’m hungry.”

“I’m not,” she returned. “It has seemed an astonishingly short morning. I must run upstairs and get tidy before sitting down.”

“Make haste, then,” he said. “I hate to be kept waiting.”

He strolled into the hall, and found there, lying on the table, addressed to him, a letter in his wife’s handwriting. He took it up, surprised, and sat down in the window-seat and opened it. It was a long while since he had received any direct news from his wife; they had ceased corresponding some time ago. He regretted that she had reopened communication with him. There could be nothing that she had to say which would be acceptable to him. He neither wished to hear from, nor see her again. He could not imagine why she had written.

He drew the letter from its envelope and spread it out slowly and read it. While he read a sensation as of cold fingers being pressed upon his heart gripped

him and turned him sick. He was not conscious of the flight of time. He sat there preoccupied and strangely still, with the letter open in his hand, looking out through the window upon the dappled sunlight playing on the lawn.

Gerda, descending the stairs some minutes later, discovered him sitting there, and judged from the tense, strained look in his eyes that he had received some news which had affected him unpleasantly. She went to him and put a hand upon his shoulder.

"Dear," she said, "what is it? Something's troubling you. You've had bad news?"

He looked up at her without moving, save for the sharp turn of his head, and answered jerkily:

"My kid—Dora—died suddenly—of flu. The funeral takes place to-morrow."

Deliberately he folded the letter and replaced it in the envelope.

"It's a blow for her mother," he said. "I'm sorry. . . ."

He did not show her the letter. He did not show her, of his own volition, anything of what he felt in respect to his daughter's death. But she had seen the look in his eyes and formed her own judgment. And she could not comfort him, could not speak to him of this sorrow. Sympathy from her would seem intrusive. She felt that she was no companion for him in this dark hour. The spirit of the dead child stood, an intangible presence, between them.

CHAPTER XXXIV

ALLERTON attended his daughter's funeral. He made no mention of his purpose to Gerda; he told her simply that he should be away for the day; but she knew quite well what his intention was.

She watched him start with a sense of pity for him in his silent distress. A new shyness took hold of her as a result of this trouble which she could not share with him. In his grave reserve he appeared to her strange and aloof. He kissed her before leaving. She had believed that he was going without this customary caress; but he turned back, as though suddenly recollecting her presence, and took her in his arms.

"I hope you won't be very lonely," he said.

"I'll get along," she answered. "Don't worry about me. If you feel inclined to stay in town to-night I shall understand."

He looked at her for a moment uncertainly, then, without answering, turned away and left her.

She went back into the house, feeling suddenly very sad and terribly lonely. She had believed of late that she stood quite within his life; now she realised that she could never do that; she was outside his life, would remain outside always. Maud Allerton and his children, the living child and the dead, maintained their claim upon him, and could not be thrust aside.

Their influence was assertive. She felt jealous for the first time of Allerton's wife, whose grief, in which he shared, brought her very near to him.

Gerda spent the morning on the river, alone with her own thoughts—sad thoughts, to which the river murmured its monotonous accompaniment. It no longer sounded a song of content—there was a note of lamentation in its music, a sound of grieving in the sigh of the wind among the willows. She leaned over the side of the boat, and looked down into the shining depths which mirrored her own face, unfamiliar in its new gravity, against the cloud-riven remoteness of the summer sky.

"Perhaps but for me he would go back and begin again," she reflected. "Perhaps he would forget. . . ."

The wind stirred the curls on her forehead and ruffled the surface of the water, and the boat listed violently with the strain of the unequal weight. She shifted her position slightly, and a curious smile bent her lips.

"If I am not careful I shall be taking the obvious way out," she said to her reflection. "If that were to happen I suppose it would be considered generally a satisfactory solution of the difficulties."

Allerton had received full particulars from his wife regarding the arrangements that had been made for his child's interment. She had not expected him to attend the funeral, but she had furnished him with details as to time and place in the event of his wish to be present.

It was immaterial to her whether he were present or not. The death of the child could not affect him deeply, she believed. He had not displayed particu-

lar interest in, or affection for, his children, and he had shown a callous indifference in his readiness to relinquish all claims upon them. She resented his attitude towards them more keenly than his desertion of herself.

She was aware of his attendance in the church. There were so few people present that she could not fail to observe him seated in a pew near the door. But she never looked towards him or gave any sign of recognition. She sat by herself. Beryl had returned to Africa, and was married and living in Port Elizabeth. Maud Allerton had to face this greatest sorrow of her life alone.

Outwardly she was changed—very considerably changed, her husband thought. He was shocked at her appearance. Possibly grief at the child's death was largely responsible for the grey, worn look of her face. She seemed to have aged suddenly. There were traces of white in her hair, and her face was lined and thin and drawn. She looked ten years older than she was. She walked and acted like a woman in a dream, a woman dazed with grief into unconsciousness of her surroundings.

Allerton was relieved when the service ended, and the sad little cortege left the church and drove to the cemetery, where the small coffin, covered with flowers, was lowered from sight into the ground. He stood at the foot of the grave, as far from his wife as possible. All the while he was more conscious of her than of what was going forward. He watched her furtively throughout the mournful ceremony; and when she turned away from the graveside, still in that white, set apathy of stony grief which found

no outlet in tears, he followed her with his glance, not moving, keeping his place at the foot of the grave, waiting until she should have passed him and entered the carriage and driven away.

When she came near him she paused, and for the first time deliberately raised her head and looked at him. Her eyes met his for one long moment in a steady, sorrowful gaze; then, to his amazement and his infinite confusion, she held out her hand.

"For the sake of our little child," she said sadly, and laid her fingers for a second in his.

He did not answer; he could find no word to say. He was conscious of the feel of her cold hand in his; it struck icy through her glove, affecting him unpleasantly; it was almost like touching the hand of the dead. Her face showed ashen behind the black veil which covered it. Then the cold fingers were withdrawn, and she moved on in her frozen grief and got into the carriage and drove away alone.

Allerton was profoundly moved. His sympathy with his wife in that hour of her sorrow was very real. He realised with shame that it should have been his duty to comfort her, that in happier circumstances he could have shared, and thereby lightened, her sorrow. Instead she had to go through her sad hour in a solitude rendered more painful through his neglect.

Some of the old love he had once felt for her surged anew in his heart. She came nearer to him in her trouble than she had been for years. He found himself thinking over their relations, wondering what it was that had changed his affection for her. He was aware that his affection had changed, had been changing for some time before he met Gerda. Possibly

had he not met Gerda matters would have readjusted with time; he would have found his balance, and settled down, as hundreds of people settle down, to the dull, respectable routine of married life shorn of the excitement of the honeymoon glamour which seemed to him so essential a part in the relations between man and woman. His temperament demanded excitement. Some people of like temperament find solace in strong drink. His demand manifested itself in an unwholesome craving for mental exhilaration which the common round of life failed to provide. It was a disease of the brain, which needed watching and careful treatment. Maud Allerton had disregarded the symptoms through ignorance. She was so reasonably sane herself that she failed to understand the virile and passionate nature of the man she had married. Had she understood him better, sympathised with him more, she might have averted the disaster which overtook their married life.

Allerton spent the night in London. Whether he would have done so had Gerda not put the idea into his mind is doubtful; since she had made the suggestion, he acted upon it, glad of being relieved of the necessity for concealing the depression which the day's doings had induced. He was in no mood for any one's company. He had before him continually the image of his wife, alone in her sorrow, bearing up and hiding her grief for the sake of the child who remained to her. He imagined her weeping in solitude over the little one's death—sitting with a picture of the child before her, recalling a thousand memories of the short, unclouded life which had been so precious to her.

He felt profoundly sorry for Maud. Nothing could have so softened his feeling towards her as this unexpected bereavement which affected them both. The child's death brought back vividly the memory of the happy days before her birth, the happy years which succeeded that event, until the fever of discontent had seized him and atrophied his powers of appreciation of the quiet pleasures of life. His home had seemed good to him in those days, and his wife had been his close chum.

It was possibly the result of depression that he felt tired and out of tune with everything. A sick longing came over him, moving him to the futile wish that he could wipe out the intervening years and get back to that state of quiet happiness and clean and decent living which he had relinquished when he flung honour to the winds, and every responsibility which should have kept him to the track.

Dulness is not, after all, the greatest ill. Freedom from dulness is largely a matter of adapting the mind to the conditions of life. Any fool can feel dull; most fools are dull. The individual gets from life pretty much what he puts into it: the dulness of which he complains is oftenest found within himself; it is but the reflection of his own mind. Allerton had found life dull because he had made it so. He had pursued his idea of excitement. No one seizes on illegitimate pleasures without injury to himself and to every one concerned. He knew very surely that he had spoilt his wife's life: the signs of unhappiness were written deeply in every line of her face. It was not shock alone at the child's death that had scored her face so heavily and whitened and thinned the once abundant

hair. Sorrow had been busily tracing its indelible marks upon her for some time. This was his work. He knew it, and was ashamed.

The next day towards evening he returned to Gerda. He got down in time for dinner and went straight to his dressing-room and changed.

Apparently Gerda had not expected him. Usually she was in the hall to welcome him when he returned after an absence, however brief. He felt slightly aggrieved at her non-appearance. But the house in its quiet restfulness struck him pleasantly. It was good to get back to it and feel at home.

He went downstairs when he was ready and entered the drawing-room. It was empty. A distressful sense of loneliness came over him. The French windows looking on the garden stood open to the summer night. He crossed the room and stood in the aperture and looked out upon the lawn. A glimpse of a white dress showed among the trees. He stepped out upon the path and went towards the spot. The feeling of uneasiness had been steadily growing in him at the unnatural quiet of the house and the absence of any sign of Gerda's presence. It had seemed like coming back to a deserted house.

During those few anxious minutes he had realised acutely what it would mean to him if ever he returned and found her gone. The suspense had been painful. But there was no sign of agitation in his manner when presently he joined her and heard her soft cry of welcome as she turned to him in the twilight and lifted her face to his, scrutinising him earnestly.

"My dear," she said, "I've been so lonely! I—had

given up expecting you to-night. I'm so glad you have come home."

He took her in his arms and kissed her gently.

"I am glad to be home, Gerda—with you," he said.

CHAPTER XXXV.

IT would have been wiser, perhaps, had Allerton gone away alone for a time after his child's death and the tragic meeting with his wife, which had left so deep an impression behind that for weeks afterwards he had the picture of her saddened face vividly before him, the memory of the broken tones in which she addressed him at the graveside ever in his ears. The knowledge that she suffered—through him, because of him, as well as on account of the child's loss—filled him with remorse.

It would have been useless to attempt to conceal his depression from Gerda; he did not try to. She was in a measure prepared for it. She knew that his sympathies were with his wife, that all the old bitterness was gone from his thoughts of her. Watching him closely, it occurred to her that but for her he would return to his wife and begin again and make good. She spent much time alone, revolving these things in her mind, seeing her duty clearly, and shrinking from it, shrinking from the blank prospect of life without love and without companionship—a colourless life, with all the beauty and the joy of it dead, with just the dull satisfaction remaining to her of having at last used her influence rightly.

She recalled Beryl's words to her at their last meeting: "Wouldn't it have been worth something—even

of self-sacrifice—to know that you had not misused your influence?” And she knew that whatever of truth there was in that, had her influence been used rightly at the time, it was valueless now. There would be no satisfaction in the sacrifice. It would be an act of retribution for right’s sake, which she would probably regret all her life.

The loneliness of the future without his love haunted her mind like a nightmare.

“We ought not to go on,” she told herself. “There’s too much at stake. I ought to end it now. It’s the one thing I can do to atone.”

She realised that if she delayed the time would go past when her influence could prevail with him; it was only while his mood was heavy and his sympathy inclined towards his wife that she could hope to persuade him to return to her. If she let this opportunity pass it was lost for ever.

The desire to do right, and the desire to keep her happiness, were strong, conflicting forces. In giving him up she gave up everything; in holding him she would retain her happiness at the expense of her peace of mind.

When a woman of Gerda’s temperament recognises clearly her responsibility, free will ceases to be hers. She is governed by forces outside her volition. The battle was waged hourly, but the result of the conflict was never in doubt from the moment when she recognised the plain course which she ought to take, which however difficult, would become easier with time, and which ultimately would bring satisfaction and peace to the man whom she had loved too well, and who, for all their happiness together, did not enjoy either

in his present life. He was cut off, through his relations with her, from the wholesome intercourse with his fellows which formerly he had known. Had they been able to marry, things would have been different; as matters were, they were people overshadowed with disgrace, whom their world refused to recognise. In the unequal ordering of things, she realised that the man might hope to win back; but she had gone under altogether. She had wrecked her life completely. It only remained to her now to salvage something of the lives she had made all but derelict with her own. Two homes had been broken up through her. She could not undo what was done; but in giving Maud Allerton back her husband, by refusing to see him again ever, she would be atoning to the utmost limit of her power. And in the years ahead the man, as well as the woman, might feel grateful to her.

She was very tender with Allerton during that period of mental struggle, in which she hardened herself to the idea of parting, and closed her mind resolutely to all thought of the future which for her,—and for her only, she believed—would be utterly blank and desolate. She couldn't face the thought of it. She trained herself to live in the present, to enjoy each hour of the days that remained to her. When she could find sufficient courage she would speak. The opportunity would present itself. She would recognise it when it came. In the meanwhile she would take what was left to her and shut her eyes to the afterwards. The veil which hides the future is fortunately impenetrable.

Unconscious of what was in her thoughts, and painfully absorbed in his own affairs, Allerton proved a

dull companion at that time. He was irritable and exacting. She knew that he was worried about his wife. She wished he would talk to her about Maud. It hurt her that he should keep that side of his life so exclusively to himself.

Once, when they were on the river together, she attempted to lead the talk round to these matters by referring to the old days in South Africa, mentioning names of people they had known out there. He did not appear particularly interested, but he did not evade the discussion. There sounded a note of regret in his voice in speaking of the old life.

"We had some good times there," she said.

"Yes," he agreed, and added briefly: "That's all over and done with."

"I wonder," she said, "if we had kept on—kept straight—what we should have made of things?"

"What's the use of wondering? We didn't," he said, and was silent.

Gerda watched for a space the lazy dip of his sculls in the water, and the clear, shining drops that ran along the blades and dripped from them when they lifted again in the sunshine. Her hand hung loosely over the side of the boat, the fingers touching the water's broken surface, which shone blue and clear in the sunlight.

"We might have if—if we had avoided one another at the outset, when we first discovered that we were dangerous to one another," she said, without looking up.

"People don't do that," he replied. "It's the element of danger which impels one to go on. We didn't seek it deliberately."

"No," she said, surprised. "Of course not."

"Some people do," he returned, and ceased rowing and looked across at her reflectively.

"Not our sort," she answered.

"No; not our sort." He started to row again. "There are men—plenty of them—who pursue women systematically from no higher motive than sensual gratification. They don't often break openly. That isn't their purpose. They don't, as a matter of fact, fall in love; they are actuated by sex. It's purely physical; there isn't any mental grip about it. I confess I never understood that sort of thing. It's altogether too gross to appeal to me. We loved finely, anyway."

"We loved finely," she echoed. "Yes, that's our defence."

"I don't feel like defending anything," he said. "I'm not ashamed of loving."

"Not ashamed of the act of loving," she said, "but just a little distressed at all it entails in our case."

"It doesn't do to think of that. We can't have everything as we would wish."

"I know that."

"You are not regretting the old life?" he asked suddenly, looking at her directly.

Gerda smiled faintly.

"How shall I answer that? I regret so many things. Certainly I don't miss my married life, if you mean that. I could never go back to that again—a loveless union—no. It's odd, but, do you know, that is the only time in my life when I felt not quite respectable. A woman who marries from any motive save love gives herself into bondage. It's degrading. I re-

spected the man I married, I liked him; but never for one moment did I love him. My life with him, kindly and considerate though he was, was an endless mortification. I've won back my self-respect since I left him. That's strange, isn't it?"

"I don't think it strange," he answered. "In my opinion love justifies everything. Actually, the one mistake you made was in marrying Wootten. He was too fine a chap to be married for expediency only. He's been let down rather badly between us."

"Yes," she agreed.

She was thoughtful for a while; then suddenly she looked up.

"We've been rather selfish people, haven't we?" she said. "So long as we got what we wanted we didn't bother about anything else."

"Every one, I suppose, plays for his own hand," he returned.

"Not in a combination game," she argued. "Life, I take it, is the biggest combination of all games. We play for our side—or we should do. That's where you and I failed. We didn't consider our side; we played into each other's hand. And so we were turned down. We didn't play the game, comrade, either of us."

"Some games are too difficult to play," he said.

"I don't know. I can't think you are altogether right. If we had put ourselves into it wholeheartedly we could have got through fairly creditably. I wonder whether, if we had played the game, we should be feeling glad now? Love is a complex emotion. It doesn't in itself stand for supreme happiness. It depends so much on how we use it whether it brings

complete satisfaction, or a sense of something lost. The flaming sword before the gate of Eden is merely a symbol for the remorse of the soul when love has been misused. We are not gross people, bent on satisfying our appetites. If we were there would be some measure of excuse for us. We can't plead that nature was too strong for us. We aren't built like that."

"If we were, we shouldn't have come such a cropper," he said. "At least we were honest. We plunged openly. We might have sustained a beastly secrecy. Lots of people do. The world, so it appears to me, is made up of the fastidious and the gross. If we hadn't been naturally fastidious, we needn't have gone away together. But the secrecy, the double life, was repellent to both of us. We did the decent thing."

He broke off abruptly, and added in an altogether different tone:

"I don't think it is particularly profitable analysing motives at this point. What on earth started you on the subject?"

"Oh, I don't know! I've been thinking about things lately. This isn't much of a life for you—for any active man, dear. You are idling up a backwater. It's time we changed—something."

"Changed what?" he asked.

"I hoped you might resolve that. I don't like you to waste your life."

"I'm not conscious of wasting anything," he said, and smiled at her. "If you are so bored with my society that you can't stand more of it, say so; and I'll know how to act."

"You never take me seriously," she said, and gave up the discussion for that morning.

It was not possible, while he sat and smiled at her, with that quizzical light in his eyes, to bring the talk round to the point from which she could direct his thoughts towards a serious consideration of the wisdom of ending their irregular mode of life.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE performance of something which appeals only in the light of duty is not made easier through delay. In awaiting her opportunity, Gerda realised that she was allowing it to pass. The opportunity is always there; it is the desire to seize it which fails.

This voluntary sacrifice of her happiness at the dictates of conscience made greater demands on her fortitude than she had allowed for. She loved this man as she believed his wife could never love him, and his love for her was far stronger than anything he could give to another woman. They had given of their best to one another; had they not in so giving injured others, there would have been none of the remorse which filled her now and spoilt her joy in their love. Irregular love is not a beautiful thing; it is a beautiful thing dragged through the mire and ruined in the process and made unlovely. There is never complete happiness in it, because there must ever be, in the mind of any decent human being, a sense of shame and regret for the inevitable soiling of what should be a fine and ennobling sentiment. Love tarnished is love robbed of its pride; it becomes a material passion and loses its fine significance.

Gerda had come to realise these truths. She could never, and she knew it, find complete satisfaction in

her present life. But to change her life in the violent manner in which she purposed changing it was not easy; nor did the personal gain to be derived from the sacrifice appear commensurate with the loss. In time she might become resigned to the change, might pluck up courage and carry on—might even in the far-away future look back on the past calmly, with a mind relieved at least from the haunting remorse which now disturbed it and made happiness impossible for her. If peace grew out of the sacrifice it would not be made in vain.

Matters came to a head one evening, when she and Allerton were together in the pretty drawing-room of their riverside home after dinner. They had spent the greater part of the day on the river, and were a little tired and silent, and Allerton was preoccupied, and inattentive when she spoke to him.

For days she had been nerving herself to open the subject of their relations, but from day to day she had put it off. This self-imposed task of breaking with him definitely was almost more than she could face. The thought of it turned her cold and sick. She loved him so, she wanted him so. Why should she be called upon to suffer like this?

The fear that he wouldn't understand gripped her. He might discern every reason but the real reason as the motive power actuating her decision—might even think her fickle. It hurt her to reflect that he could, very possibly would, misjudge her. The purely altruistic point of view is not the easiest to grasp. And there was always in his mind the consciousness that he could not make the usual reparation. Although she had never reproached him, he believed that

she felt very keenly his inability to keep the promise he had made her when she left her home with him. The fact that it was none of his fault did not make her position less painful. Love may satisfy a woman up to a certain point, but it cannot give her the sense of security which the assured position of marriage conveys.

The knowledge that he had done her a grave wrong troubled him continually. He was thinking of that and other things as he stood at the open window, with his shoulder resting against the frame, while Gerda sat within the lighted room, observing him attentively, noting the puckered lines of thought knitting his brows, and the stern set look on his face. It was neither a happy nor a contented look, and it had settled there continually of late. She had watched it often, and wondered what thoughts called up that careworn expression. He never talked to her of the things which disturbed him. She was not, she felt, in his confidence.

Suddenly the impulse to speak moved her irresistibly. She laid aside the book she had been holding, but not reading, while she studied his profile and wondered about him and the unspoken thoughts that so engrossed his mind that he was seemingly oblivious of her presence, was entirely unaware of her quiet concentration upon himself. His mind had been so far from his surroundings that the sound of her voice recalled him with a jerk. He swung round and looked at her with searching eyes.

"You are worrying about your wife," she said.

For the space of a second he did not answer. If, in the first instance, he was moved to deny this, he thought

better of it. He was worried. There was no sense in not admitting it.

"Oh, well, I can't help feeling sorry for her—just now, anyhow," he replied. He evaded her eyes. "She—looked—heartbroken."

Gerda drew a long breath.

"Yes," she said, and was silent for a while, not looking at him, looking past him out through the open windows at the black shadows of the trees moving mistily in the wind against the starlit sky. "I was afraid it would be like that," she said. "You've had her in your thoughts ever since the funeral. I've watched you, and I've seen how it was with you."

He showed surprise.

"You don't expect me to be utterly callous, do you?" he asked.

Her face saddened. He misunderstood her, as she had believed he would do; but she had not anticipated that he would misjudge her motives from the outset. It made her task the harder. But she had been making up her mind for so long to speak that she was resolved, since she had begun, to go through with it to the finish.

"I don't think I ever supposed you were callous," she said. "It's only natural you should grieve for her; she's suffering. We don't know how much she suffers. Perhaps that it as well, seeing how greatly we are responsible for her sadness."

She paused and looked at him keenly with steady, observant eyes.

"George, does it sometimes come to you, as it comes to me, the wish that we had not wrecked so much?" she asked suddenly; "the desire to mend a little or what

we've broken? Haven't you—perhaps just lately—had the thought that it might be possible to go back some of the way and begin again?"

Allerton stared at her, incredulous, and amazed beyond words to express. The last thing in the world he expected to hear was what Gerda uttered now with evident sincerity, her earnest eyes scrutinising him with a fixed intensity that watched for some sign of understanding and sympathy from him, and failed to discover what it sought. He moved abruptly and crossed the floor and stood in front of her.

"What, in the name of mystery, has set you talking like this?" he asked.

"My dear," she said, and put out a hand as though she would have touched him, but drew it back again and was still. "Do you remember that night in Venice when I told you of my dream? That dream foreshadowed events. I've realised that during these last few days while I've watched you grieving—grieving over the things we've broken, the things you've lost. You were plunged into deep waters when your child died. And I—I can't help you, can't get near you. I can only stand by and look on. My dear, I can't bear it; I can't go on any longer."

Allerton sat down beside her and laid a hand on her shoulder. He was greatly moved. The thought that perhaps of late he had been neglectful occurred to him as the sole explanation of her outburst. He had been engrossed with his own affairs. But he had supposed she would make allowance for his very natural distress. The fact that she was outside it all had not struck him until now. He had been selfishly absorbed and inconsiderate.

"What's the trouble, Gerda?" he asked. "You're all unnerved, dear one. I've been a dull fool these days, and have left you too much to your own thoughts. I'll not deny that the kiddie's death was a blow. A man can't help feeling these things. And I'm worried on Maud's account. But none of that is as imperative to me as your happiness. Surely you know that?"

"Happiness!" she repeated, and turned aside her face so that he should not see the sorrow in her eyes. "We've thought so much of happiness, you and I. We've taken it at all costs. We've enjoyed it—we *have* enjoyed it," she insisted in low, emphatic tones. "Our life together has been very happy. But these things can't last. They cost too dearly. One can't wring happiness for long out of others' tears. You've discovered that—since the child's death."

"No," he contradicted. "You are distorting things. The child's death alters nothing."

"It alters everything," she rejoined quietly. "It has made another ghost to trouble my peace. They come to me, these ghosts, these sad faces which I have made sad, and they ask me why I wreck so many lives simply that I may better enjoy my own. And I have no answer. I am just ashamed."

"You are morbid, Gerda," he said. "We have done what hundreds of people have done who found out too late that they wanted one another. If in coming together we hurt others, what must we have suffered had we agreed to part? We couldn't help loving one another."

"No," she agreed; "we couldn't help loving. But we could have stopped at that."

Allerton almost smiled.

"You don't think that really? It's all against human nature. When happiness is there for the taking, a man takes it."

"And loses it," she said. "When we tread on hearts to reach our happiness we fail in grasping it. From each heart which we bruise there rises a dark mist of pain which blots the happiness out."

"I'm hanged if it blots out mine," he said, in tones which betrayed a slight impatience with her increasing earnestness. She was getting altogether beyond his depths; her mood exasperated him. He sought to rally her. "Naturally, I could wish that things might be comfortable all round; since that is impossible, I see no reason why we should be miserable."

Gerda looked at him fixedly.

"I don't think you mean that, seriously," she said. "I've watched you, and I've seen you cut to the heart. The sight of your wife upset you more than you allow. We have hurt ourselves with these others. On every side there are sad eyes evading ours, and sad hearts which turn from us. We have killed their trust in us. What have we done with life?—broken and destroyed, and built up nothing."

"Oh, come!" he urged. "You exaggerate matters. We have got some good out of life, you and I. I know I have. I wouldn't change anything."

"Be patient with me," she pleaded, and laid a small, nervous hand on his knee. She was making the supreme effort now, fighting for her own soul and the soul of this man whom she loved better than herself, and who would never, she knew, understand. Love with him meant possession; sacrifice had no part in

his conception of the term. "I've thought so much about these things of late. I've come to look at life differently; and I see now that we were wrong. We might have made a fine thing of life, and we didn't. We acted selfishly. There is something in honour, after all, dear—something fine and satisfying. If we had kept to the track we should have known in time a surer happiness than the excitement we seized. We should have lived to be thankful for our restraint. We ought to have kept to the track."

"Well, we didn't," he interrupted shortly. "And I can't truthfully say I regret it; nor does the dull form of virtuous complacency you describe appeal to me. You are talking rotten sentiment. What do you want me to infer from it? Are you tired of our life together?"

Quietly she withdrew her hand, and turned her eyes from him, and sat, hurt and with quivering lips, struggling for control. Allerton got up and crossed the room and took up his former position at the window.

"Go on," he said, with his back to her. "Let me have it, whatever you have got to say. You've been hinting at things for some time. You are for parting. . . . And you choose now—the time when I am hit and sore—to strike at me. You know what my feelings are. You know I don't want to part. You would break up our lives together—end everything—for a silly sentiment. I confess I don't understand you."

"I am only trying to do what is right," she said.

"Right!" he echoed, with scorn in his voice.

"You must know, whatever you feel about it, that

to go on as we are doing, wrecking so much, is aggravating the wrong," she insisted, not heeding his interruption. "We have reached the point where we have to pause. To continue along the present path is impossible; it is paved with the hearts of those who loved us. I can go no further treading upon human hearts."

"You prefer to tread on mine," he said.

Gerda winced. Had it not become a matter of conscience with her, had she not steeled herself to carry through the task she had so reluctantly undertaken, she could not have gone on. She was dealing his love for her a mortal wound: she realised that. He placed no credence in the reasons she stated. Simply he could not believe that a woman who had given up everything for love could sacrifice the love she had won at such cost to a sudden and tardy remorse. The idea was altogether beyond his grasp. Her decision was influenced, he believed, by the improbability of their ever being able to regularise their position.

He turned to look at her, and saw with surprise that her eyes were filled with tears. She looked very beautiful in her tragic grief. The fear of losing her, the thought that already her love for him was waning, stung him to a savage mood. He did not wish to close their lives together. He wanted to keep her—keep everything—as it was, unchanged.

"You don't show much consideration for me, do you?" he asked.

"I am considering you," she replied, "above everything."

"Indeed! I fail to see where I come in. Do you imagine this talk of separation is pleasant for me to

listen to? You haven't even consulted me. I don't want to alter anything."

He returned to her side, and stood leaning over the back of the sofa, with his face close to hers, looking steadily into her eyes.

"Doesn't our love count for anything with you, Gerda? Have you forgotten so soon all it has meant between us? Is it easy to part? My God, it isn't easy for me!" He gripped her shoulder and held her as in a vice. "What do you mean? Tell me, have you ceased to love me? I'll only believe it from your own lips."

"Don't!" she said, wincing, her face wrung and stained with the heavy tears that rolled down her cheeks. "I can't stand it. Haven't I suffered enough?"

"Suffered!" he ejaculated. "Do you mean through your life with me? Have I caused you suffering? What, in God's name! do you mean?"

He was almost beside himself with anger. Passion choked his utterance. His hand on her shoulder gripped painfully. This talk of parting, of making good, exasperated him; and her allusion to personal suffering sounded the final note of ingratitude in his ears. At least, he had loved her faithfully and well; he had little to reproach himself with on that head. The irreparable injury he had done her he was prone to overlook.

Gerda turned miserably from him, not in anger; she had always known that he would not understand. In her eyes a look of unutterable tenderness for him shone through the mist of her tears.

"It is not in our love I suffer," she said gently.

"Don't think that, dear. I suffer because of what I've done—because of what I've lost. I've lost my place among good women. That means more to a woman than any man can realise. I can bear no more. The pain which I have caused others haunts me waking and asleep—it gets into my dreams. To continue like this fills me with despair. I can't go on. Separating now will be hard; but the sorrow which comes through parting is our own sorrow, and that is easier borne than the sorrow we inflict on others. Let us end it—here—to-night. Dear, believe me, that is the only thing left us to do."

Allerton removed his hand from her shoulder and straightened himself and remained very still and stiffly upright, looking at her with the crushed expression of a man in whom hope is suddenly extinguished. He could not doubt her sincerity. All that she uttered now was the fruit of a long travail of painful thought that ended in the anguished birth of this unforeseen conception of duty. He had been an unconscious witness of the slow process of its conception; but, until the thing was starkly revealed to him, no suspicion of its development had penetrated his mind. He was amazed and profoundly dismayed and deeply hurt.

"You mean that?" he said, incredulous still, reluctant to be convinced, despite the conviction which every sentence carried. "Gerda, you mean that you will break with me?—end everything—all our life together? My dear, think! Have you considered all it means—separating—now?"

She shrank from him as he stooped over her and made as though he would take her in his arms. She

could not have borne that. Realising the rebuff, he drew back.

"You can never have loved me," he said, slowly, in tones of intense bitterness. "I was a fool to believe I had won the priceless gift of your love. Your love! You have no heart. You don't care what becomes of me. You talk of parting as lightly as though we were the merest acquaintances. I'd go down into hell for you. I'd barter my soul to keep you. And you—you would sacrifice my happiness to a woman's burst of heroics."

He turned from her in anger and walked away to the window. At the window he paused and looked back at her before leaving the room.

"My God!" he cried with passion. "To think that I should love you as I do! To think that I should have flung aside the love of a good woman for the sake of a woman whose heart is incapable of holding love. You've taught me a lesson, anyway."

He went quickly out through the window, his footsteps crunching heavily upon the gravelled path. Gerda listened to them until they died away in the distance. When she could no longer hear them, she leaned her arms on the cushions of the sofa and dropped her face on them and wept.

"All the sorrow in the world is in my heart," she sobbed.

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